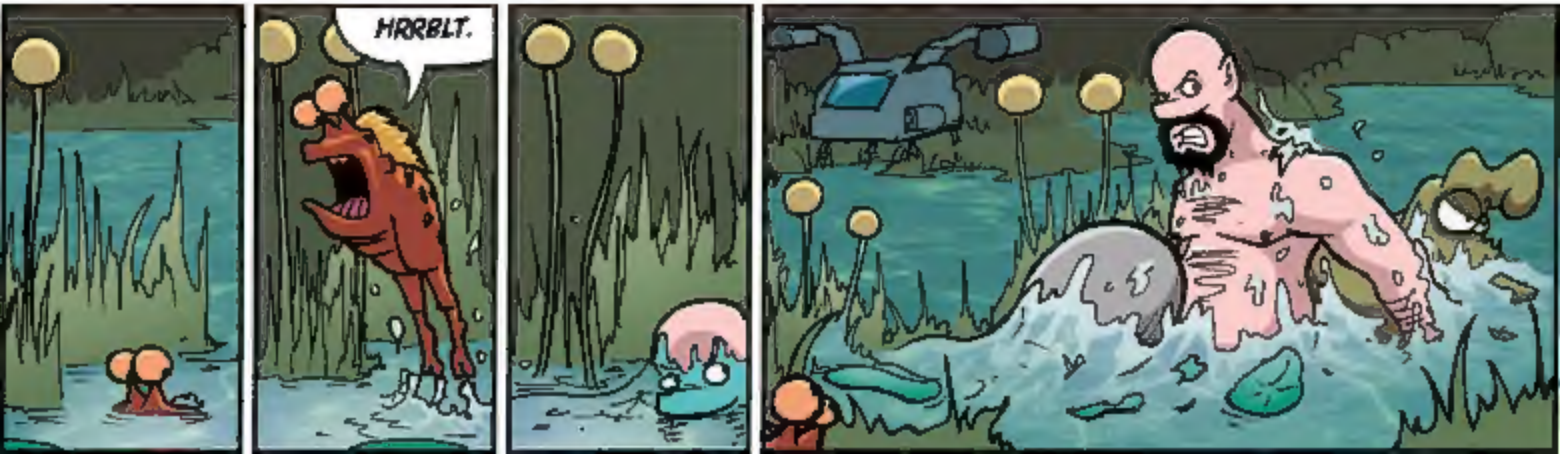
# BOOK 13: RANDOM ACCESS MEMORABILIA

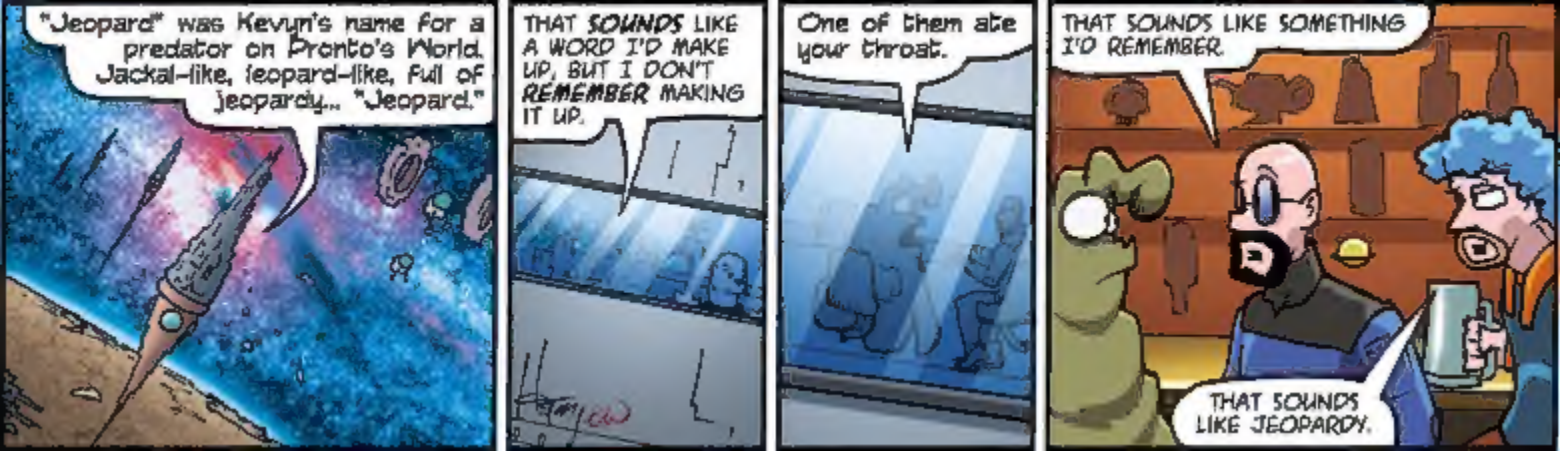
An artifact the size of a planet, and an identity crisis the size of an entire nation...




THOOOM!
HRRBLT.
That's not how I remember it, Commander.


WHO'S TELLING THIS STORY, SERGEANT?
Oooh! I know this one! "A mind-control test subject who hasn't yet had his head reexamined!"
THE CORRECT ANSWER WAS "MY COMMANDING OFFICER, SIR."
Okay, but the story is worth more free drinks my way. Sir.


The way I remember it we all hid in the lake until the search team left.
IF THEY LEFT, HOW DID WE HIJACK THEIR VEHICLE AND ASSAULT SHUFGAR'S BASE?
You got killed by a jeopard and we buried you.
THAT DOESN'T GET THEIR VEHICLE HIJACKED.
That's not how we got back to Shufgar's base.
SCHLOCK'S RIGHT. HIS STORY IS BETTER. WHAT'S A JEOPARD?

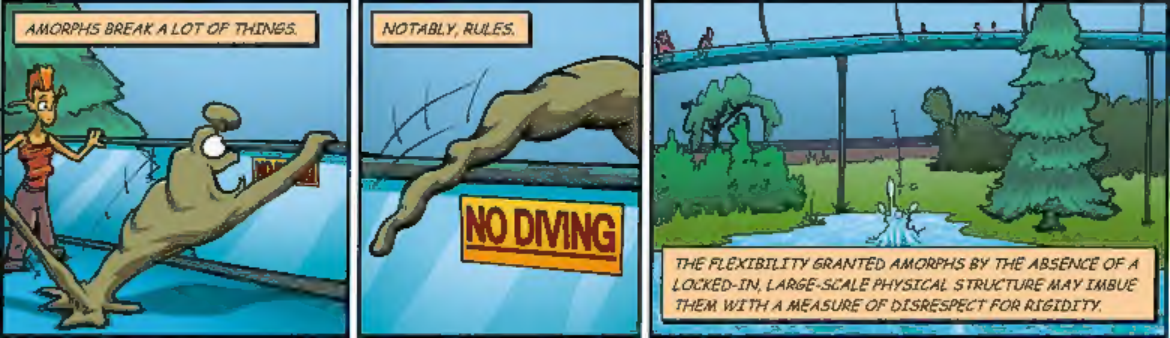

"Jeopard" was Kevyn's name for a predator on Pronto's World. Jackal-like, leopard-like, full of jeopardy... "Jeopard."
THAT SOUNDS LIKE A WORD I'D MAKE UP, BUT I DON'T REMEMBER MAKING IT UP.
One of them ate your throat.
THAT SOUNDS LIKE SOMETHING I'D REMEMBER.
THAT SOUNDS LIKE JEOPARDY.

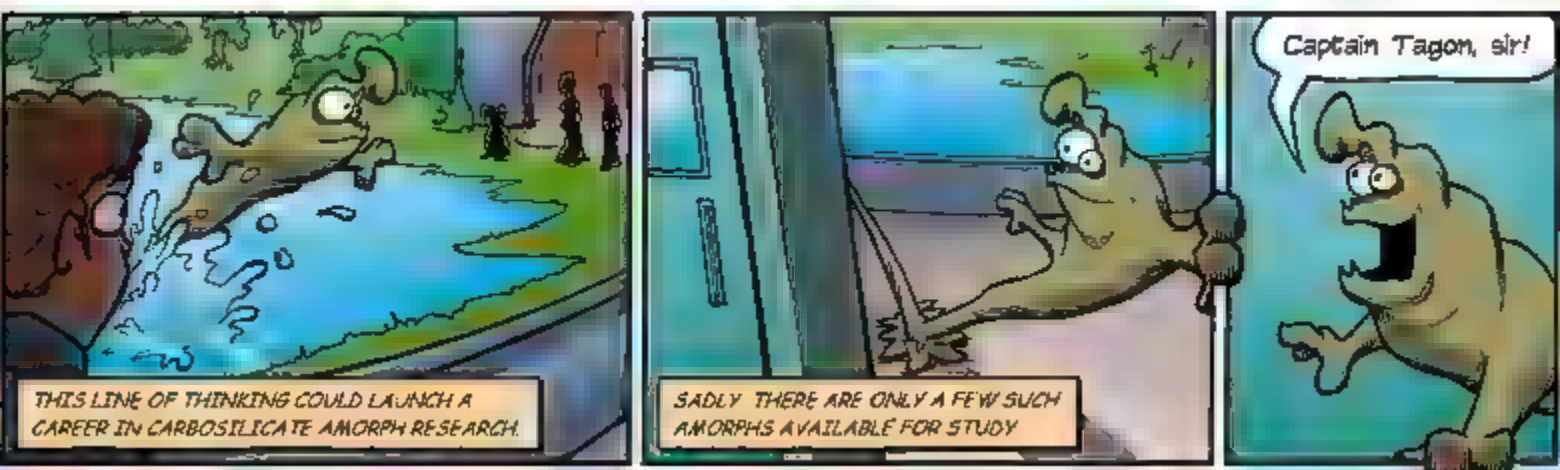

IN MY VERSION WE HIJACKED THE SEARCH-TEAM'S SHIP, ASSAULTED SHUFGAR'S BASE, PRONTO GOT VAPORIZED, AND I ENDED UP IN A NANNY-BAG.
In my version you got killed by a jeopard, then you got captured, then you got killed by Shufgar, then the rest of us got captured.
SPEAKING AS A REFUGEE FROM THE 21ST CENTURY, THE WORD "KILLED" LOSES SOME OF ITS PUNCH WHEN YOU BUILD SENTENCES LIKE THAT.
Then Pronto got killed, and you saved us, but Pronto stayed dead.
AND THAT JUST MAKES ME THINK OF ZOMBIE MOVIES.

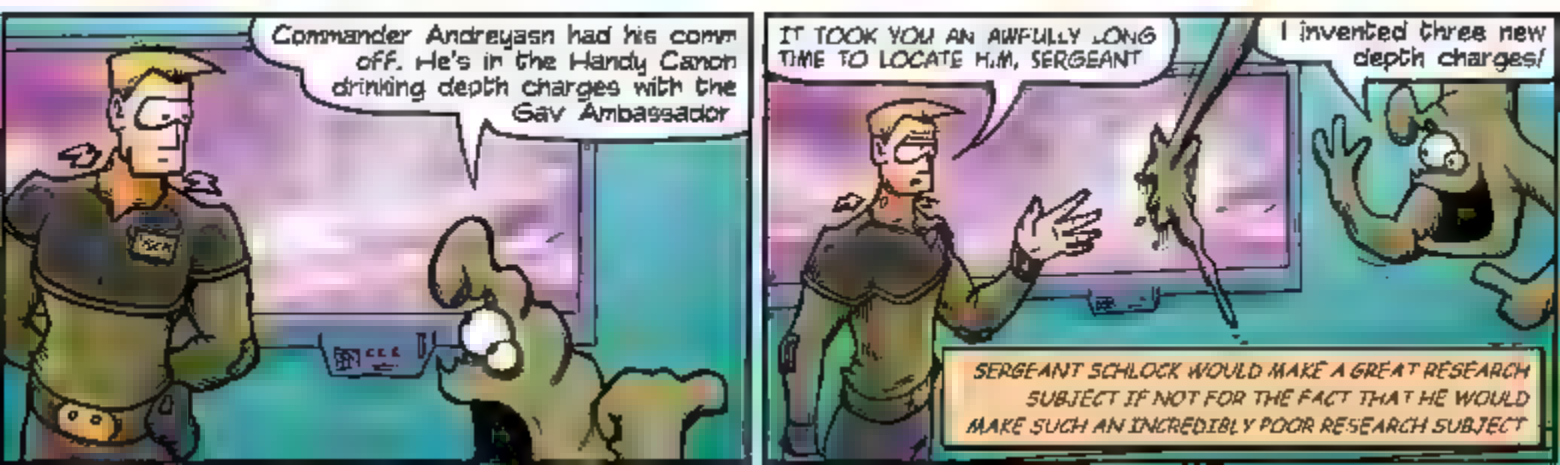

SERGEANT, WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN HERE?
Drinking.
I saw that you had two drinks, and the Gav had one big drink, and then I realized I was thirsty.
"THE GAV." I'M A SPECIES NOW.
COMPLETELY INNOCENT, THEN? NO ULTERIOR MOTIVE?
Nope. I just like to drink from really big things.
Oh, and the Captain says it's time for your brain thingy.
HAH!

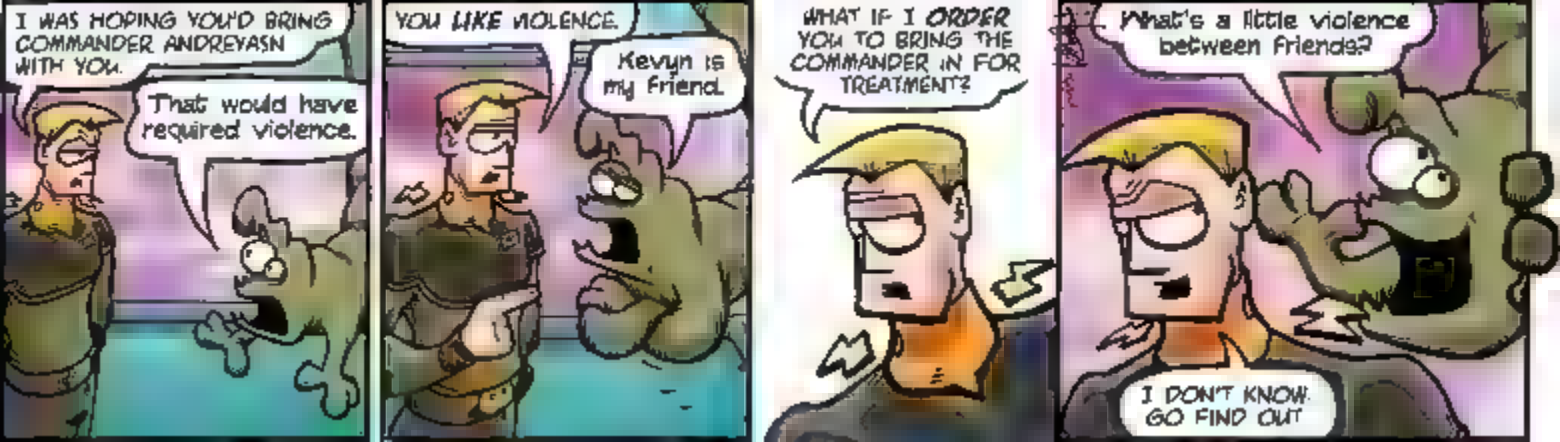

Commander, you have to get your head fixed.
NO, I HAVE TO SHOOT THE BULL WITH MY FRIEND WHILE ENJOYING MILDLY TOXIC BEVERAGES.
SERGEANT, WHAT KEVYN IS SAYING IS THAT HE'S GOING TO WORK UP THE NERVE FOR THIS PROCEDURE BY GETTING HIS DRUNK ON WITH ME.
THAT'S VERY INSIGHTFUL, GAV. ALSO² COMPLETELY INACCURATE.
BARTENDER, A GUINNESS WITH A DEPTH CHARGE FOR MY FRIEND HERE.
I SAID MILDLY TOXIC.


GUINNESS...
DEPTH CHARGE.
YES, THEY CAN PROBABLY DO THAT WITH JUST ABOUT ANYTHING.
Bartender! I need you to "depth charge" my Ovaltwik with some kerosene!
I AM NOT CLEANING UP AFTER WHAT COMES NEXT.


AMORPHS BREAK A LOT OF THINGS.
NOTABLY, RULES.
NO DIVING
THE FLEXIBILITY GRANTED AMORPHS BY THE ABSENCE OF A LOCKED-IN, LARGE-SCALE PHYSICAL STRUCTURE MAY IMBUE THEM WITH A MEASURE OF DISRESPECT FOR RIGIDITY.

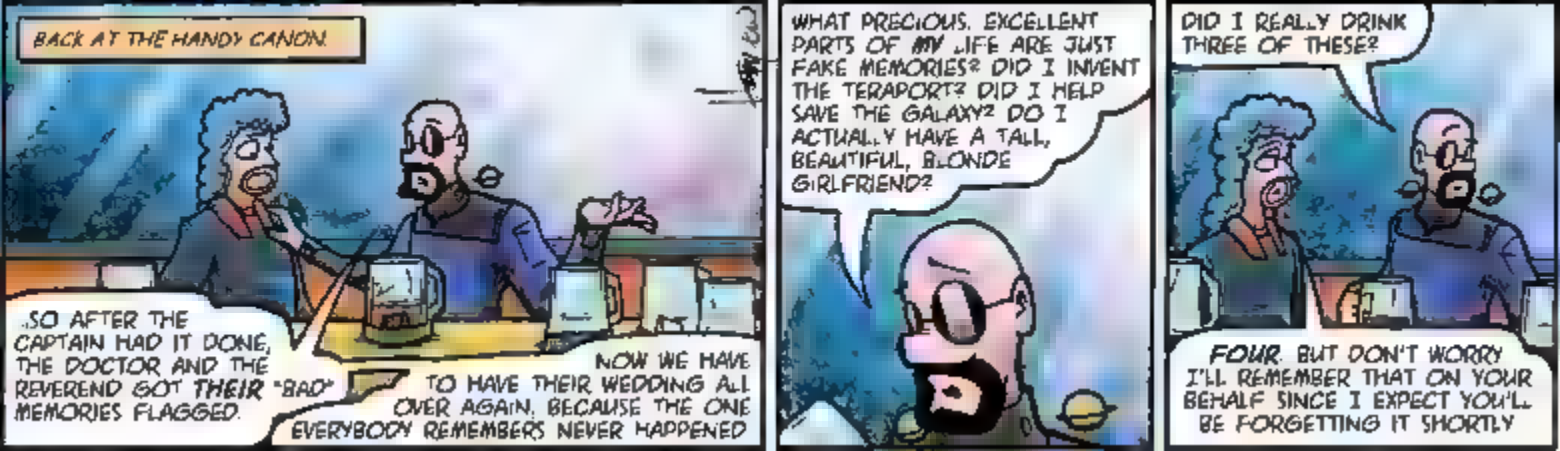

THIS LINE OF THINKING COULD LAUNCH A CAREER IN CARBOSILICATE AMORPH RESEARCH.
SADLY THERE ARE ONLY A FEW SUCH AMORPHS AVAILABLE FOR STUDY
Captain Tagon, sir!

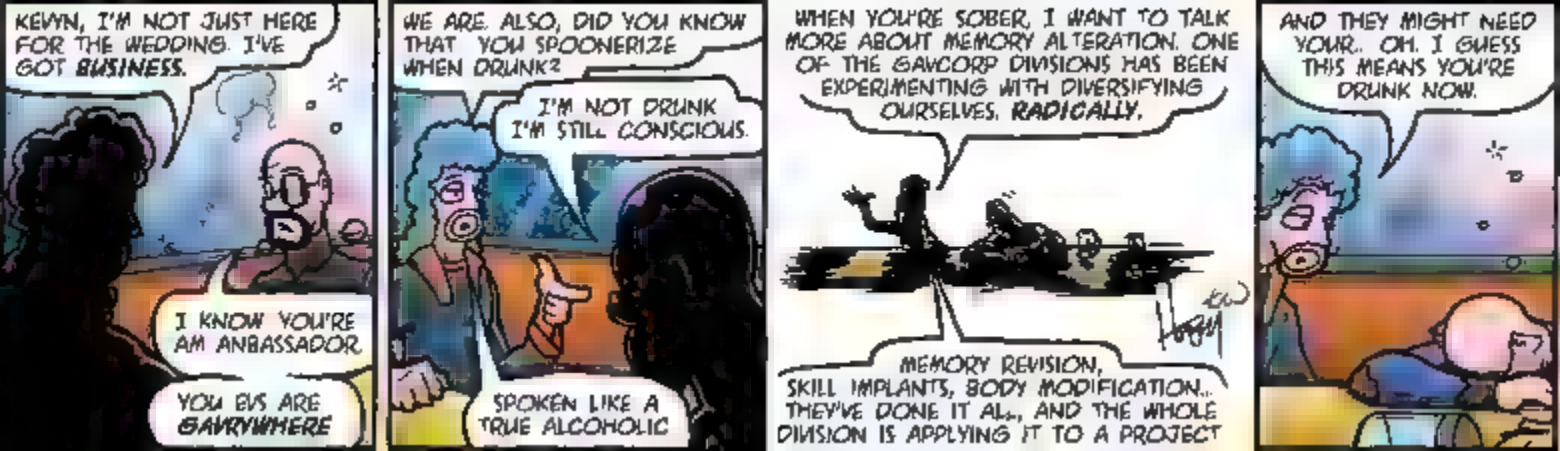

Commander Andreyasn had his comm off. He's in the Handy Canon drinking depth charges with the Gav Ambassador
IT TOOK YOU AN AWFULLY LONG TIME TO LOCATE H.M. SERGEANT
I invented three new depth charges!
SERGEANT SCHLOCK WOULD MAKE A GREAT RESEARCH SUBJECT IF NOT FOR THE FACT THAT HE WOULD MAKE SUCH AN INCREDIBLY POOR RESEARCH SUBJECT


I WAS HOPING YOU'D BRING COMMANDER ANDREVASN WITH YOU.
That would have required violence.
YOU LIKE VIOLENCE.
Kevyn is my friend.
WHAT IF I ORDER YOU TO BRING THE COMMANDER IN FOR TREATMENT?
What's a little violence between friends?
I DON'T KNOW! GO FIND OUT

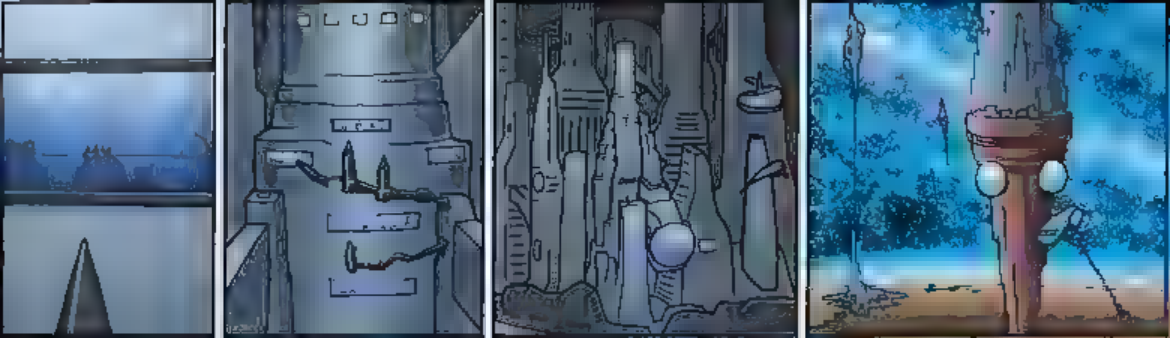

Are you ordering me to escort Commander Andreyasn here for treatment?
YES, SERGEANT BRING HIM HERE THAT'S AN ORDER
Yee-hah!
You appear awfully relaxed in light of the possibility that the sergeant will actually injure the commander
THEY'RE FRIENDS ALSO. I'VE GOT NERVES OF STEEL


This is the right thing to do, Captain.
I HAVE MY DOUBTS.
I know. That's why I'm saying reassuring things like "this is the right thing to do."
AND BECAUSE I KNOW YOU'RE MILLIONS OF TIMES SMARTER THAN ME, THOSE SIMPLE WORDS ARE EVEN MORE REASSURING
And I know that is how you really do feel, even though you buried the truth under a heavy layer of sarcasm.
I'M SO GLAD WE HAD THIS LITTLE TALK

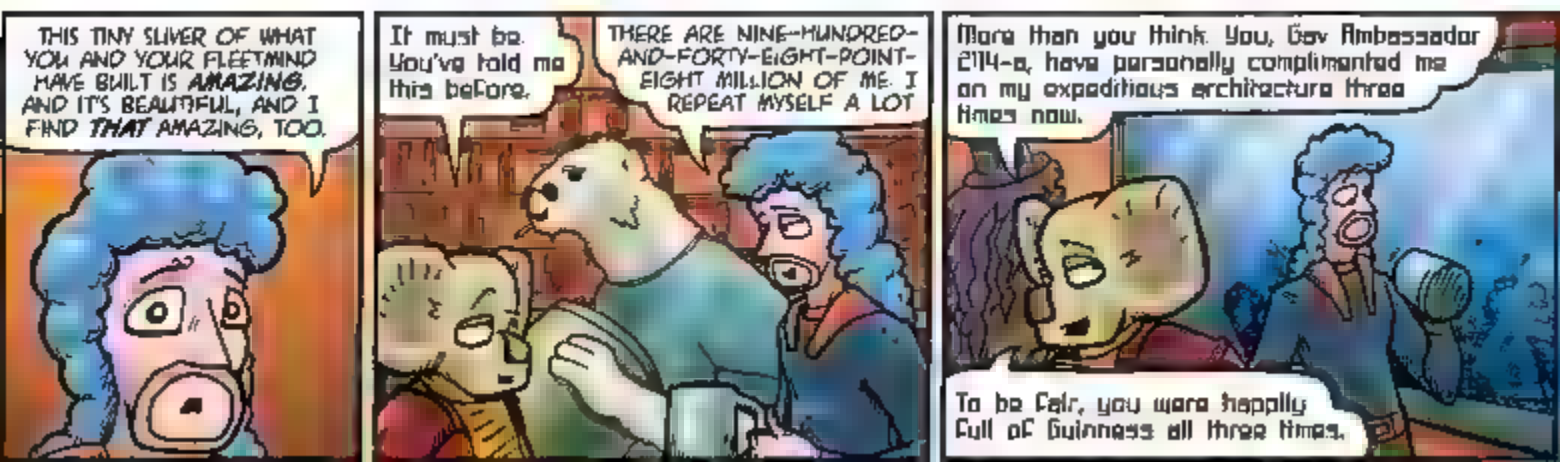

BACK AT THE HANDY CANON.
SO AFTER THE CAPTAIN HAD IT DONE, THE DOCTOR AND THE REVEREND GOT THEIR "BAD" MEMORIES FLAGGED.
NOW WE HAVE TO HAVE THEIR WEDDING ALL OVER AGAIN, BECAUSE THE ONE EVERYBODY REMEMBERS NEVER HAPPENED
WHAT PRECIOUS, EXCELLENT PARTS OF MY LIFE ARE JUST FAKE MEMORIES? DID I INVENT THE TERAPORT? DID I HELP SAVE THE GALAXY? DO I ACTUALLY HAVE A TALL, BEAUTIFUL, BLONDE GIRLFRIEND?
DID I REALLY DRINK THREE OF THESE?
FOUR. BUT DON'T WORRY I'LL REMEMBER THAT ON YOUR BEHALF SINCE I EXPECT YOU'LL BE FORGETTING IT SHORTLY


KEVYN, I'M NOT JUST HERE FOR THE WEDDING. I'VE GOT BUSINESS.
I KNOW YOU'RE AM AMBASSADOR
YOU EVS ARE GAVRYWHERE
WE ARE. ALSO, DID YOU KNOW THAT YOU SPOONERIZE WHEN DRUNK?
I'M NOT DRUNK I'M STILL CONSCIOUS.
SPOKEN LIKE A TRUE ALCOHOLIC
WHEN YOU'RE SOBER, I WANT TO TALK MORE ABOUT MEMORY ALTERATION. ONE OF THE GAVCORP DIVISIONS HAS BEEN EXPERIMENTING WITH DIVERSIFYING OURSELVES. RADICALLY.
MEMORY REVISION, SKILL IMPLANTS, BODY MODIFICATION... THEY'VE DONE IT ALL, AND THE WHOLE DIVISION IS APPLYING IT TO A PROJECT
AND THEY MIGHT NEED YOUR... OH. I GUESS THIS MEANS YOU'RE DRUNK NOW.


BARKEEP! WHAT'S YOUR SYSTEM FOR GETTING AN UNCONSCIOUS INEBRIATE FROM HERE TO HIS..
UMMM...
HOME?
Brain surgery, then home.
THAT'S A PRETTY STEEP PENALTY FOR PUBLIC INTOXICATION, BUT I BET IT WORKS.



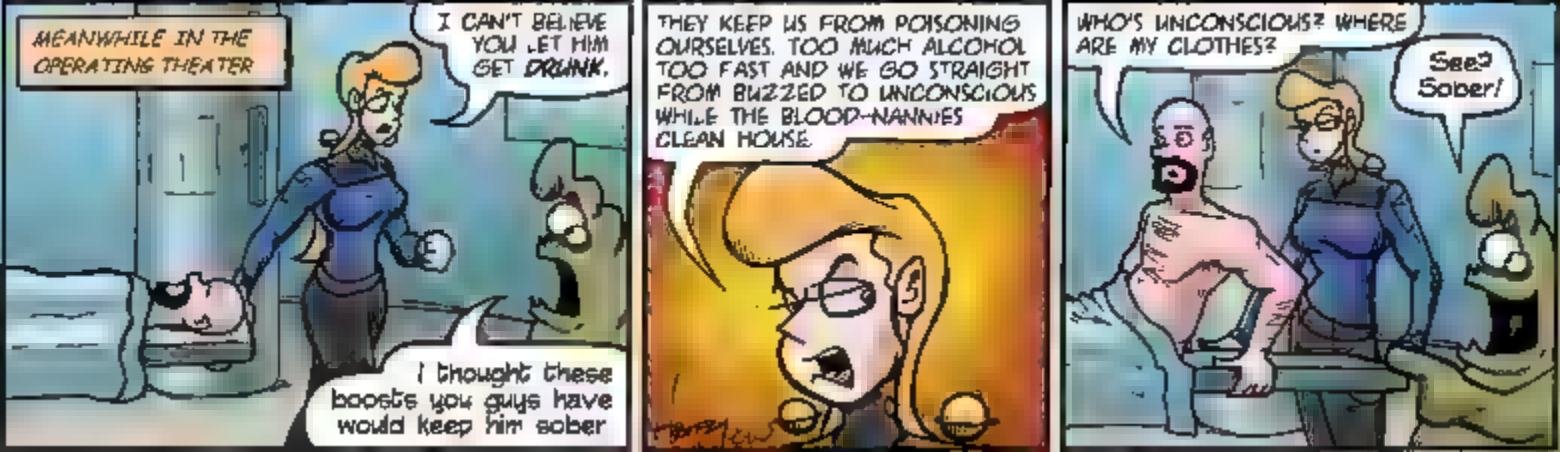

Hello, Ambassador
HELLO, PETEY.
Worrying about your friend?
ADMIRING THE VIEW
I CAN SEE THREE MORE OF THESE FLYING CITIES BEFORE I LOSE THEM TO STARLIGHT AND THE HORIZON.

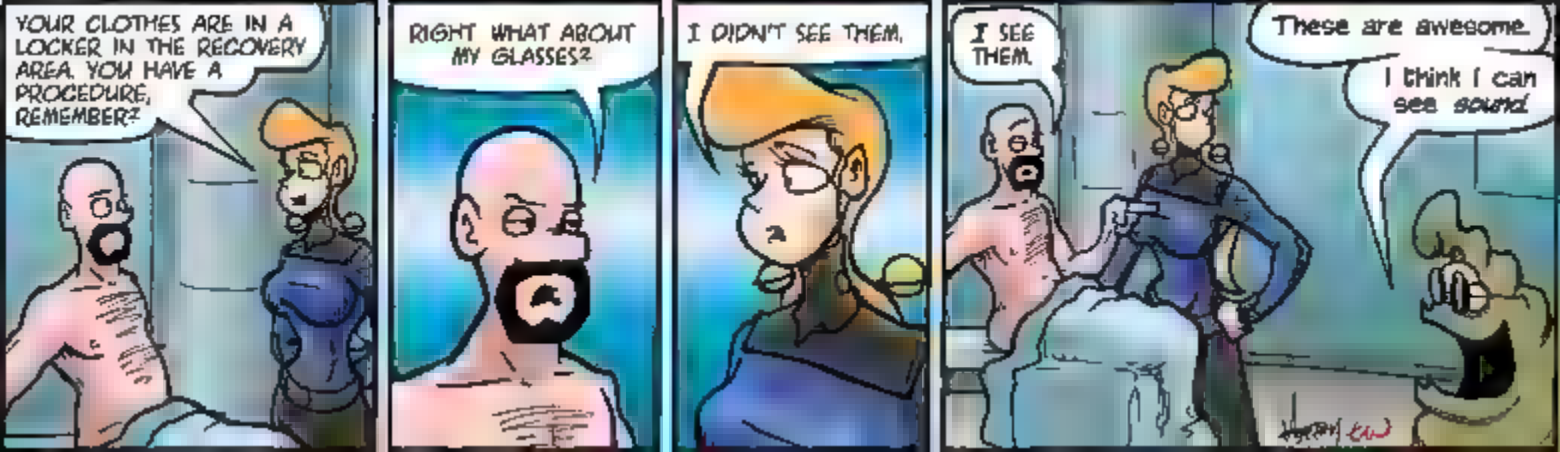

THIS TINY SLIVER OF WHAT YOU AND YOUR FLEETMIND HAVE BUILT IS AMAZING. AND IT'S BEAUTIFUL, AND I FIND THAT AMAZING, TOO.
It must be. You've told me this before.
THERE ARE NINE-HUNDRED-AND-FORTY-EIGHT-POINT-EIGHT MILLION OF ME. I REPEAT MYSELF A LOT
More than you think. You, Gav Ambassador 2114-a, have personally complimented me on my expeditious architecture three times now.
To be fair, you were happily full of Guinness all three times.

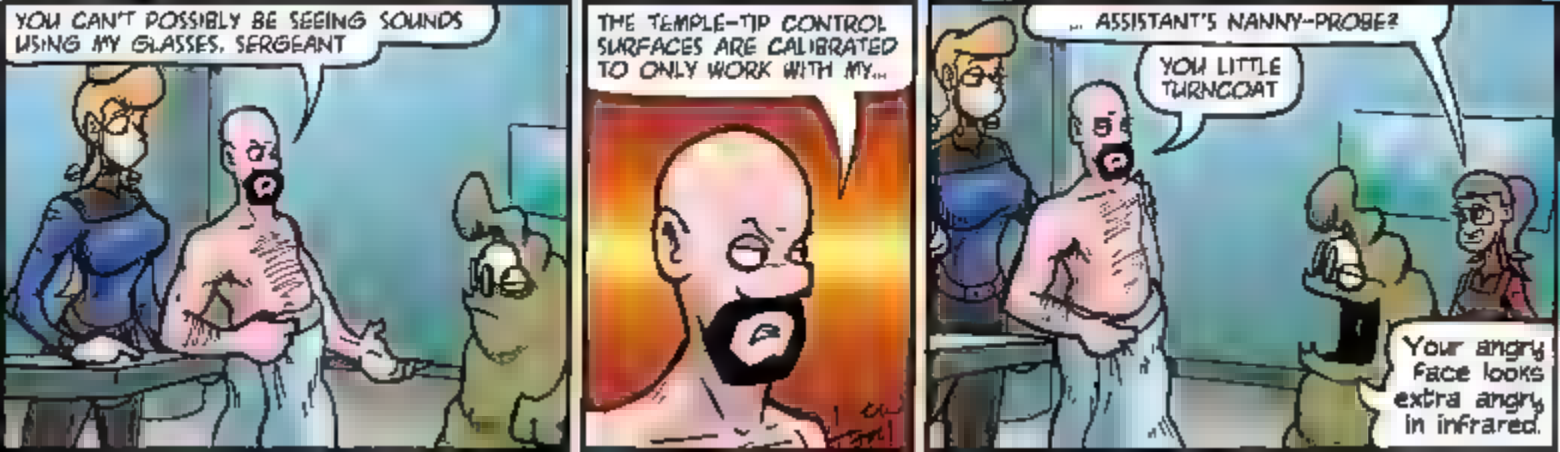

I AM A LITTLE BIT WORRIED ABOUT KEVYN
YOU'RE RE-WRITING HACKED PARTS OF HIS BRAIN.
THAT BRAIN IS A NATIONAL TREASURE.
It is a galactic treasure.
YEAH. THAT'S A BETTER WORD
So of course I am keeping close tabs on the backups.
WHO ARE YOU CALLING A BACKUP?


YOU'RE KEVYN'S TIME-CLONE!
PLEASED TO MEET YOU.
I WORKED WITH DOZENS OF GAVS IN MY TIMELINE, TRYING TO SAVE THE GALAXY.
FOND MEMORIES, GRIM WORK. YOU GUYS ARE AMAZING.
YOU DON'T WEAR GLASSES, WHY NOT?
THEY INTERFERED WITH A JOB I NEEDED TO DO
ALSO, THIS WAY IT'S EASIER FOR PEOPLE TO TELL US APART
PEOPLE LIKE OUR READERS

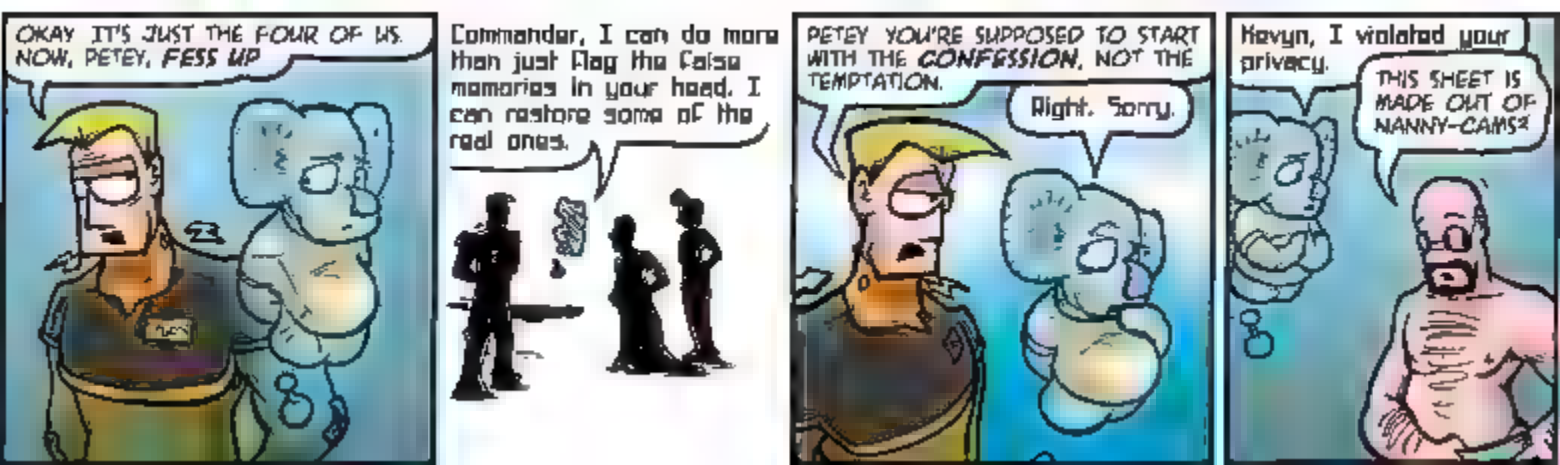

CAN I TALK TO YOU ABOUT CLONE DIVERGENCE?
SURE, BUT I'M AN EDGE CASE.
I WAS SIX WEEKS "AHEAD" OF COMMANDER ANDREYASN WHEN I ARRIVED IN THIS TIME-STREAM. MY CAPTAIN WAS DEAD, MY SISTER WAS DEAD, AND OUR GALAXY WAS DYING.
WE WERE ALREADY PRETTY DIVERGENT, AND MY ARRIVAL ENSURED THAT NONE OF THOSE BAD THINGS HAPPENED HERE.
NOW HE HAS A GORGEOUS BLONDE GIRLFRIEND AND I MARCH GARDEN-STATUE ROBOTS TO WAR AGAINST A NICE OLD MAN WITH A MEAN STREAK.
YOU'RE BOTH LIVING THE HIGH LIFE.

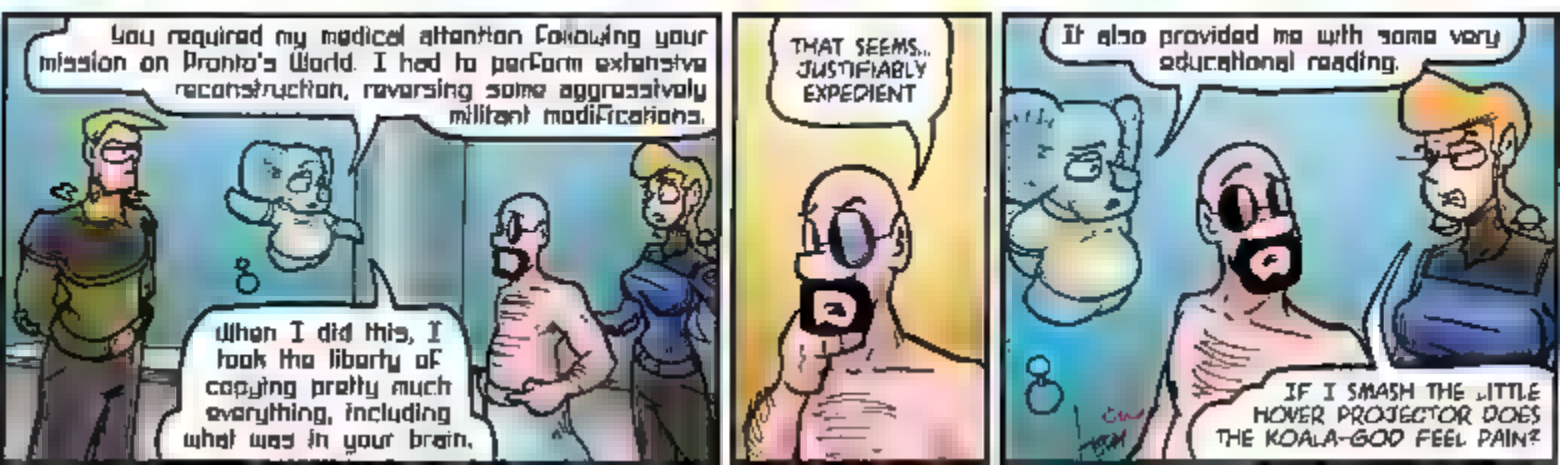

MEANWHILE IN THE OPERATING THEATER
I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU LET HIM GET DRUNK.
I thought these boosts you guys have would keep him sober
THEY KEEP US FROM POISONING OURSELVES. TOO MUCH ALCOHOL TOO FAST AND WE GO STRAIGHT FROM BUZZED TO UNCONSCIOUS WHILE THE BLOOD-NANNIES CLEAN HOUSE.
WHO'S UNCONSCIOUS? WHERE ARE MY CLOTHES?
See? Sober!

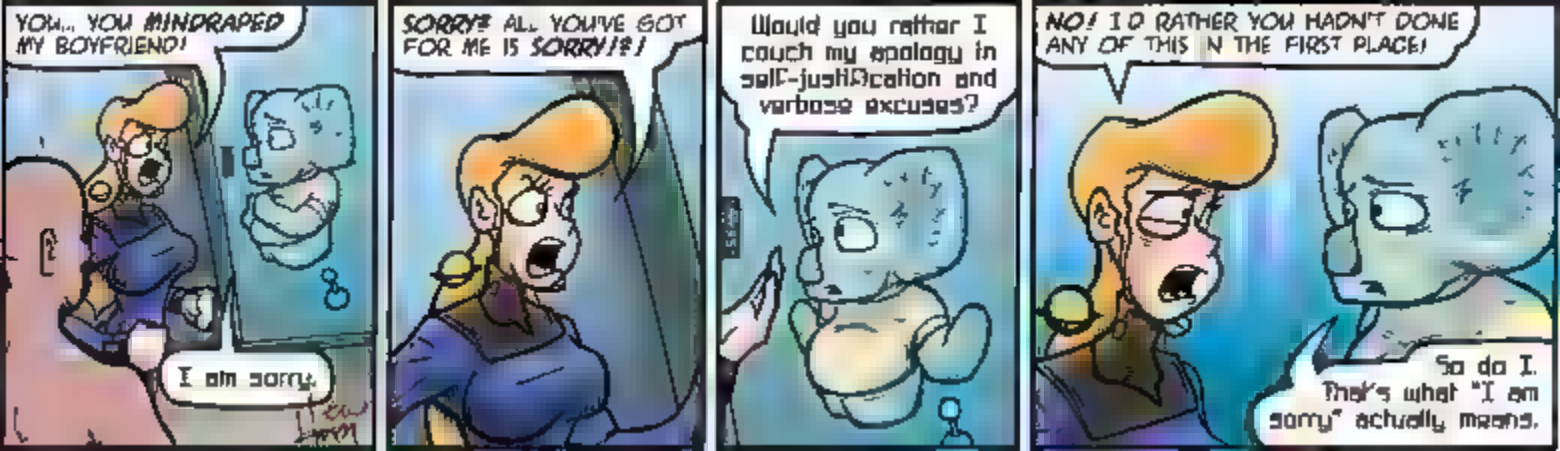

YOUR CLOTHES ARE IN A LOCKER IN THE RECOVERY AREA. YOU HAVE A PROCEDURE, REMEMBER?
RIGHT. WHAT ABOUT MY GLASSES?
I DIDN'T SEE THEM.
I SEE THEM.
These are awesome.
I think I can see sound.

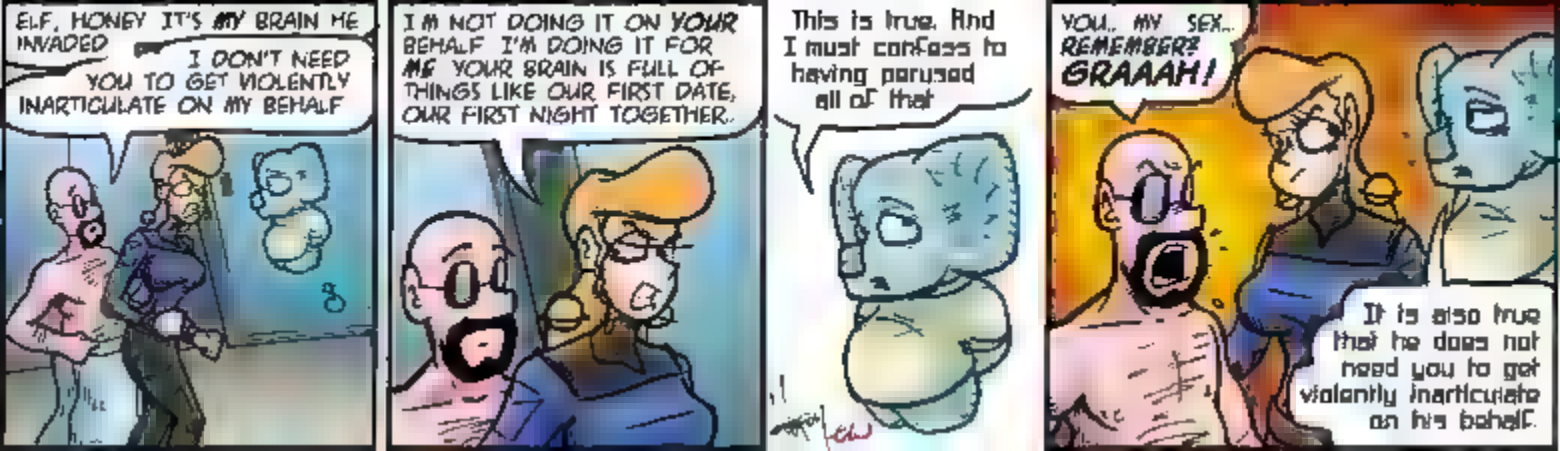

YOU CAN'T POSSIBLY BE SEEING SOUNDS USING MY GLASSES, SERGEANT
THE TEMPLE-TIP CONTROL SURFACES ARE CALIBRATED TO ONLY WORK WITH MY...
... ASSISTANT'S NANNY-PROBE?
YOU LITTLE TURNCOAT
Your angry face looks extra angry in infrared.

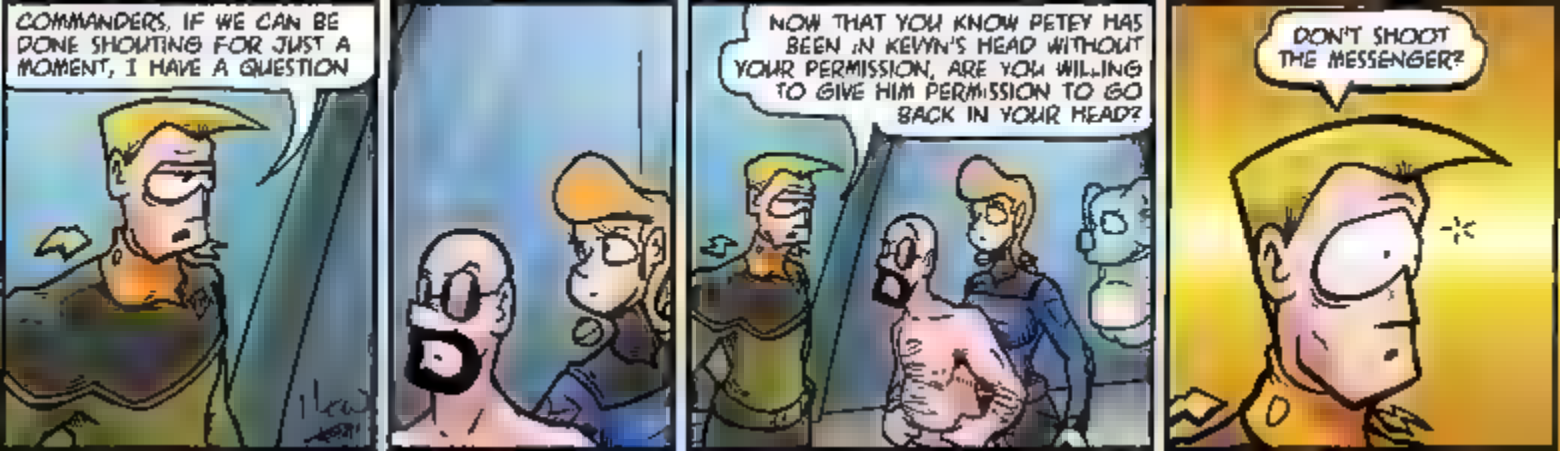

Hello, Commander Are you ready to start?
YES.
SERGEANT SCHLOCK, LIEUTENANT VENTURA, YOU'RE EXCUSED COMMANDER FOXWORTHY, STAY HERE WITH US PLEASE.
COME ON, SARGE. IT'S GROWN-UP TIME IN THERE
Tagon gets to stay?
THE CAPTAIN IS AUTOMATICALLY A GROWN-UP IT'S A RULE.


OKAY. IT'S JUST THE FOUR OF US. NOW, PETEY, FESS UP
Commander, I can do more than just flag the false memories in your head. I can restore some of the real ones.
PETEY. YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO START WITH THE CONFESSION, NOT THE TEMPTATION.
Right. Sorry.
Kevyn, I violated your privacy.
THIS SHEET IS MADE OUT OF NANNY-CAMS?

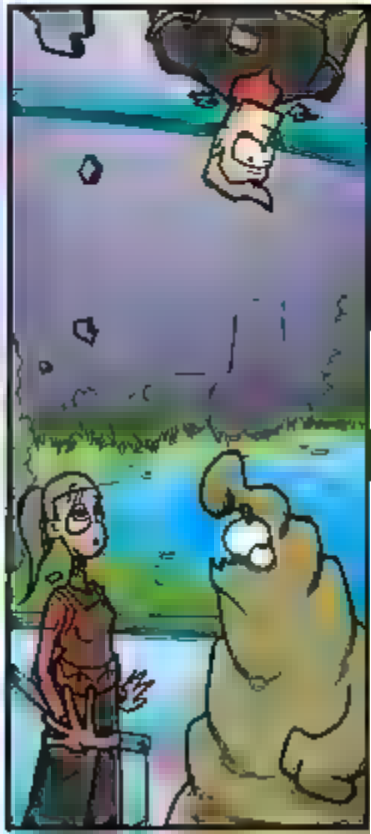

You required my medical attention following your mission on Pronto's World. I had to perform extensive reconstruction, reversing some aggressively militant modifications.
When I did this, I took the liberty of copying pretty much everything, including what was in your brain.
THAT SEEMS... JUSTIFIABLY EXPEDIENT
It also provided me with some very educational reading.
IF I SMASH THE LITTLE HOVER PROJECTOR DOES THE KOALA-GOO FEEL PAIN?


YOU... YOU MINDRAPED MY BOYFRIEND!
I am sorry.
SORRY? ALL YOU'VE GOT FOR ME IS SORRY!?!
Would you rather I couch my apology in self-justification and verbose excuses?
NO! I'D RATHER YOU HADN'T DONE ANY OF THIS IN THE FIRST PLACE!
So do I. That's what "I am sorry" actually means.


ELF, HONEY IT'S MY BRAIN HE INVADED
I DON'T NEED YOU TO GET VIOLENTLY INARTICULATE ON MY BEHALF
I'M NOT DOING IT ON YOUR BEHALF I'M DOING IT FOR ME YOUR BRAIN IS FULL OF THINGS LIKE OUR FIRST DATE, OUR FIRST NIGHT TOGETHER.
This is true. And I must confess to having perused all of that
YOU.. MY SEX.. REMEMBER? GRAAAH!
It is also true that he does not need you to get violently inarticulate on his behalf.


COMMANDERS, IF WE CAN BE DONE SHOUTING FOR JUST A MOMENT, I HAVE A QUESTION
NOW THAT YOU KNOW PETEY HAS BEEN IN KEVYN'S HEAD WITHOUT YOUR PERMISSION, ARE YOU WILLING TO GIVE HIM PERMISSION TO GO BACK IN YOUR HEAD?
DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER?

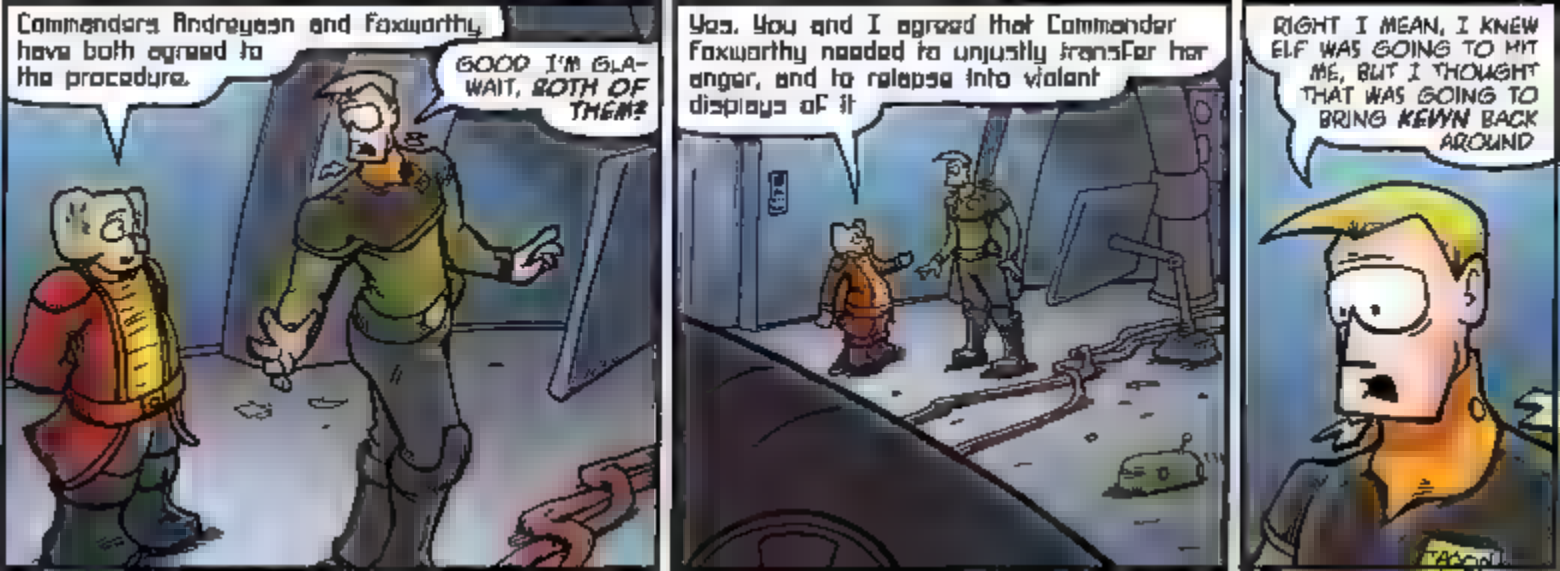

YOU CAN REALLY HEAR THEM FROM ALL THE WAY OUT HERE?
Mostly. Tagon's saying something about permission, back of your head ...
Oooh. Shouting. Uh oh.


WHAT DID YOU SAY, SIR?
"DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER."
Yup. That was when all the shouting started.


THAT WAS A BRILLIANT LANDING, CAPTAIN.
I LANDED ON MY FEET THAT'S WHAT THEY'RE FOR.
YEAH, BUT MOST PEOPLE CAN'T DO THAT WITH THEIR FEET AFTER BEING KNOCKED THROUGH A WALL
COMMANDER FOXWORTHY WAS GRACIOUS ENOUGH TO TELEGRAPH HER PUNCH.
WHAT GAVE IT AWAY?
TIGHTEN.NG OF HER FISTS, CLENCHING TEETH..
Screaming "I'm going to knock you through that wall..."


You're suspending her without pay, right sir?
NO.
You're making her work without pay?
DON'T BE RIDICULOUS.
SHE HAD A LEGITIMATE GRIEVANCE AND NEEDED TO PUNCH SOMEBODY. PETEY WAS ONLY PRESENT IN HOLO SO I GOT TO BE THE SOMEBODY
Who do I get to punch when I have a grievance?
YOU'RE A GRUNT IF YOU'VE GOT A GRIEVANCE YOU PROBABLY DESERVE TO BE SUSPENDED WITHOUT PAY

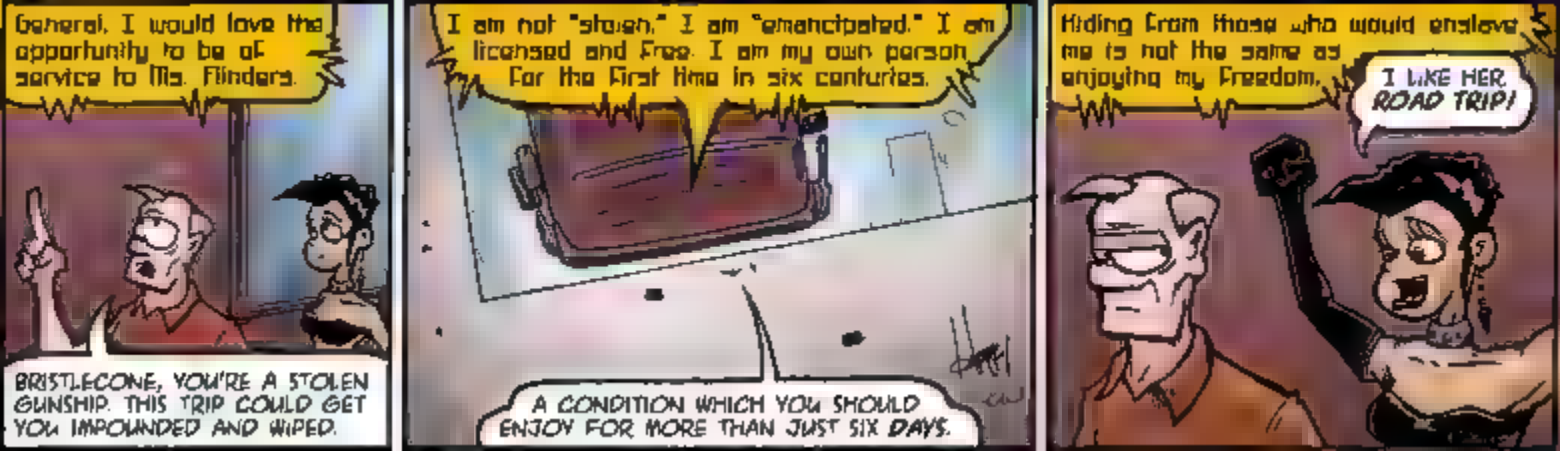

Commanders Andreyasn and Foxworthy have both agreed to the procedure.
GOOD I'M GLA- WAIT, BOTH OF THEM?
Yes. You and I agreed that Commander Foxworthy needed to unjustly transfer her anger, and to relapse into violent displays of it
RIGHT I MEAN, I KNEW ELF WAS GOING TO HIT ME, BUT I THOUGHT THAT WAS GOING TO BRING KEVYN BACK AROUND
TACCO!

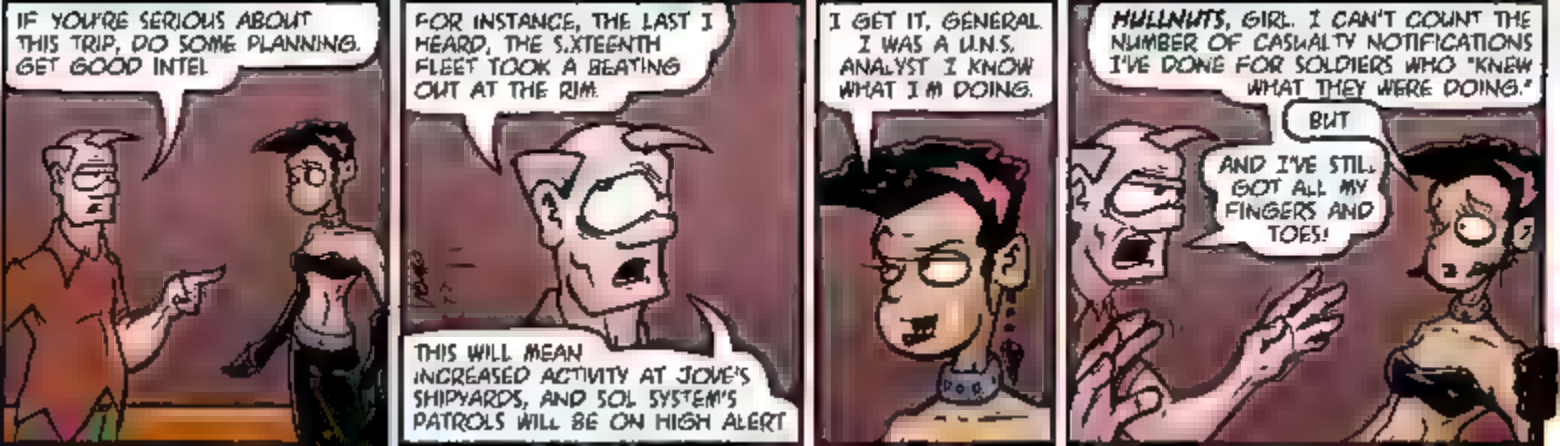

After striking you, E.F immediately felt ashamed and guilty, which, when coupled with the catharsis inherent in knocking you through a wall, opened her up to an actual discussion of the matter
This drew Commander Andreyasn in, and with their negative feelings pushed off onto you, I was able to explain things to them very rationally.
And you were brilliant. Nobody else could have played that
I KNOW MY PEOPLE.
AND I KNOW YOU'RE LETTING ME THINK THIS WAS ALL MY IDEA TO BEGIN WITH.
You positively stuck that landing.
IF I LET ANYBODY ELSE PUNCH ME WE'LL BOTH KNOW THAT YOU BOTCHED MY BRAIN SURGERY
IN FACT... I CAN'T BELIEVE I LET IT HAPPEN EVEN ONE TIME.
People with normal, non-botched brains feel that way every day.

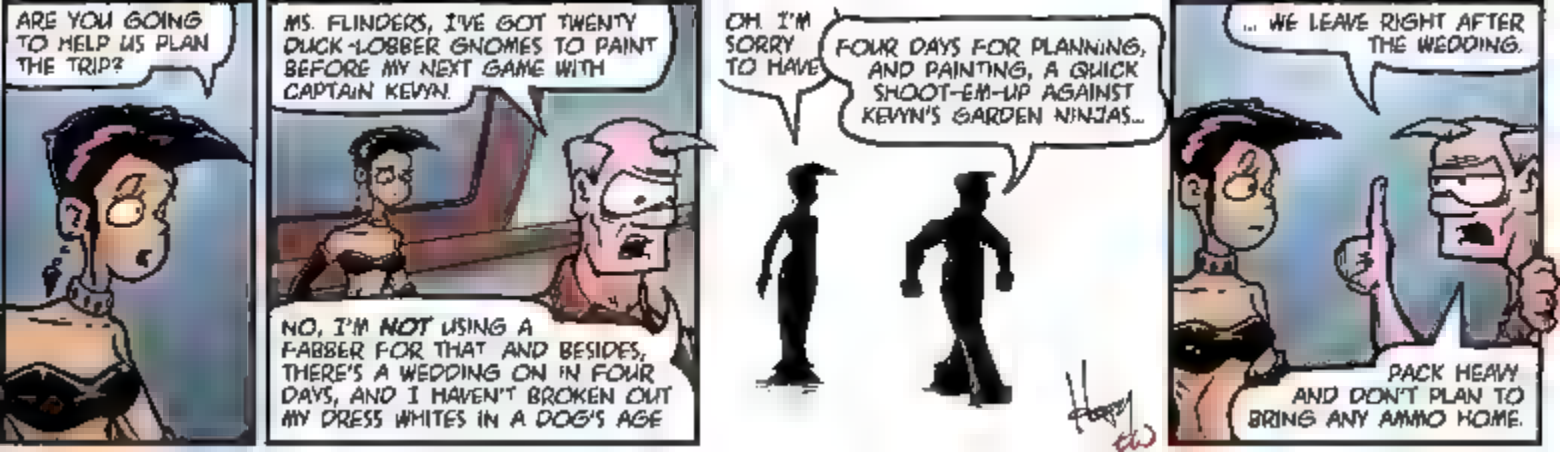

PARNASSUS DOM DOCK FIVE BAY TWENTY-FOUR
GENERAL TAGON, SIR? KATHRYN FLINDERS.
I REMEMBER YOU. YOU WERE IN A BATHROBE HOLDING A GUN AND A JAR. MY HEAD WAS IN THE JAR GOOD TIMES.
YOU SHOULD PUT SOME CLOTHES ON. THIS OUTFIT OF YOURS IS EVEN MORE REVEALING THAN THAT BATHROBE WAS.
I'M TRYING OUT A NEW LOOK FOR A LITTLE WHILE.
YEAH.. DIDN'T YOU USED TO BE BLONDE?
EXTREME MAKEOVER, "RUNNING FOR MY LIFE" EDITION.

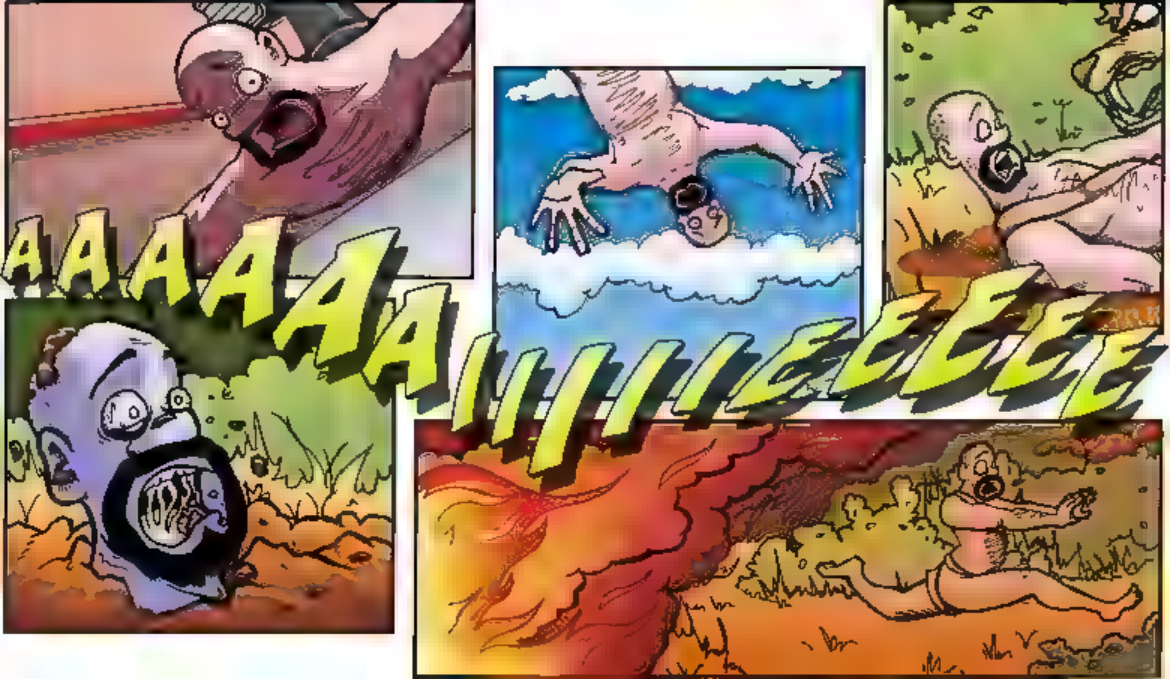

YOU'RE NOT RUNNING FOR YOUR LIFE NOW, ARE YOU MS. FLINDERS?
NO, AT THE MOMENT I M IN HIDING.
I SORT OF... ALMOST-MURDERED A U.N.S. DEEP COVER FIELD AGENT
ALMOST MURDERED?
I'M CLAIMING SELF DEFENSE.
ALSO, HE GOT BETTER.
YOU SHOULD BE MORE THOROUGH.

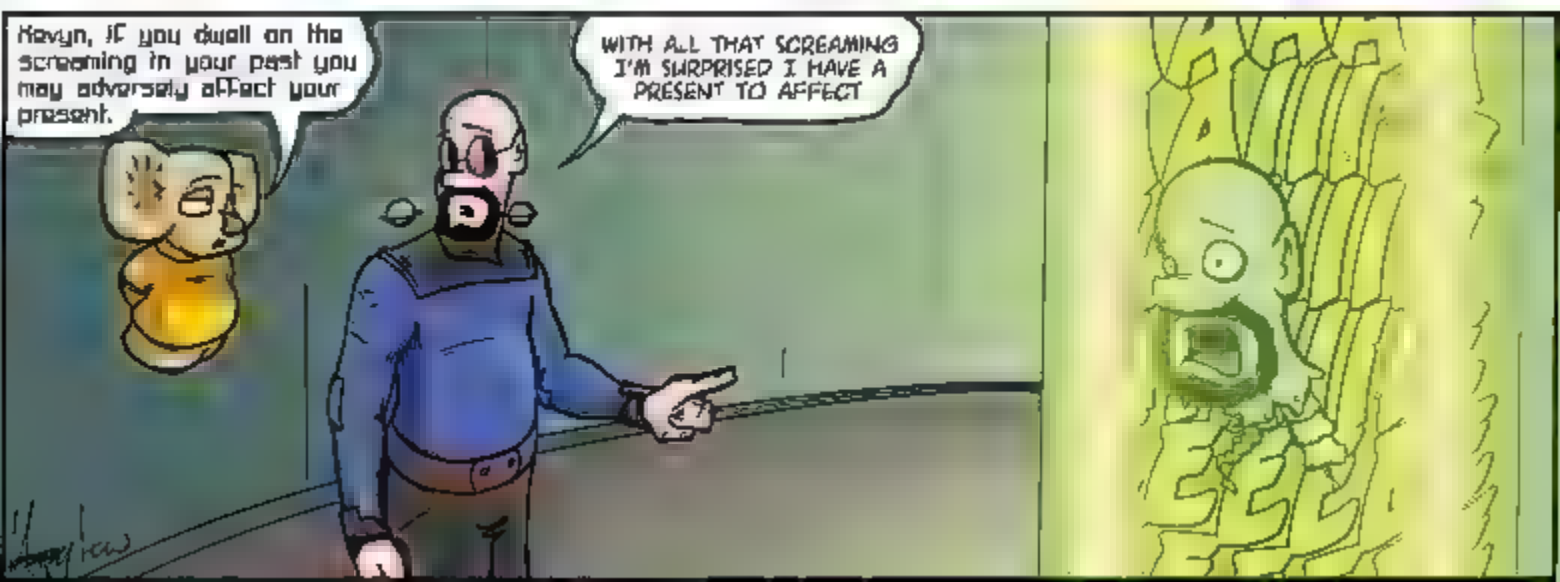

SO, WHAT BRINGS YOU OUT HERE TO THE DOCKS, MS. FLINDERS?
I HEARD YOU'D MADE FRIENDS WITH THE GUNSHIP HERE. I'M LOOKING FOR A RIDE INTO SOL SYSTEM, AND I'D RATHER NOT TAKE COMMERCIAL TRANSPORTATION.
IF YOU'RE RUNNING FROM THE U.N.S., SOL SYSTEM IS PROBABLY THE WRONG DIRECTION.
I'VE GOT FRIENDS ON OLD MELONE STATION. I THINK I MAY NEED TO GET THEM OUT
SO, WHEN YOU SAY "RIDE" YOU REALLY MEAN "ARMED EXTRACTION."
JUST HOW FRIENDLY ARE YOU WITH THIS EMANCIPATED GUNSHIP, GENERAL?


General, I would love the opportunity to be of service to Ms. Flinders.
BRISTLECONE, YOU'RE A STOLEN GUNSHIP. THIS TRIP COULD GET YOU IMPOUNDED AND WIPED.
I am not "stolen." I am "emancipated." I am licensed and free. I am my own person for the first time in six centuries.
A CONDITION WHICH YOU SHOULD ENJOY FOR MORE THAN JUST SIX DAYS.
Hiding from those who would enslave me is not the same as enjoying my freedom.
I LIKE HER ROAD TRIP!

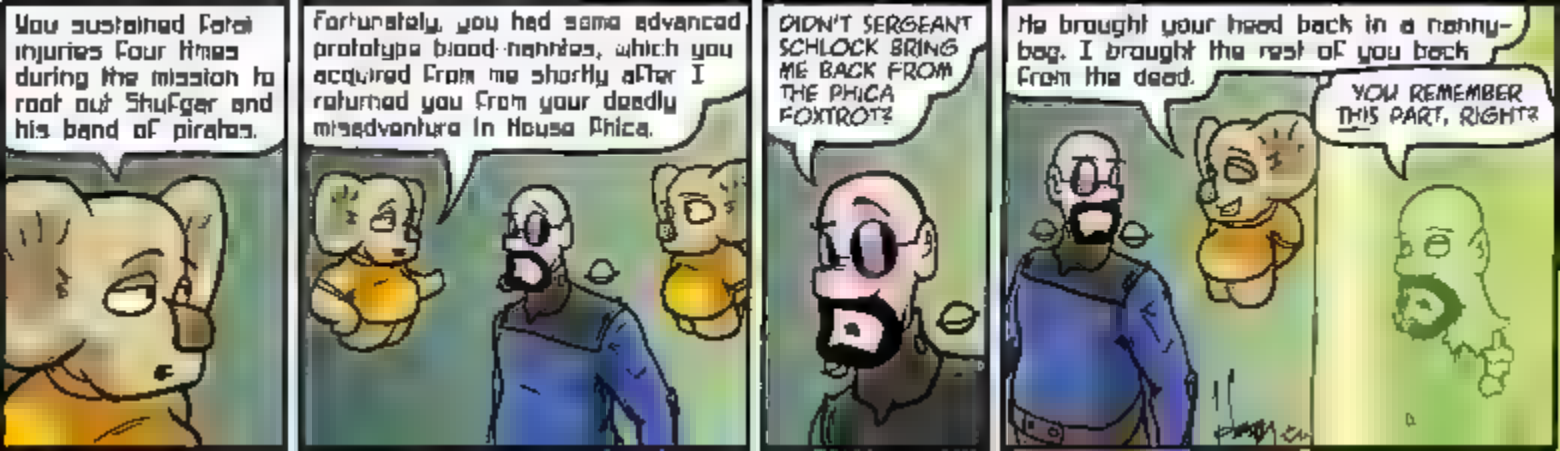

IF YOU'RE SERIOUS ABOUT THIS TRIP, DO SOME PLANNING. GET GOOD INTEL
FOR INSTANCE, THE LAST I HEARD, THE S.XTEENTH FLEET TOOK A BEATING OUT AT THE RIM.
THIS WILL MEAN INCREASED ACTIVITY AT JOVE'S SHIPYARDS, AND SOL SYSTEM'S PATROLS WILL BE ON HIGH ALERT
I GET IT, GENERAL I WAS A U.N.S. ANALYST I KNOW WHAT I'M DOING.
HULLNUTS, GIRL. I CAN'T COUNT THE NUMBER OF CASUALTY NOTIFICATIONS I'VE DONE FOR SOLDIERS WHO "KNEW WHAT THEY WERE DOING."
BUT
AND I'VE STILL GOT ALL MY FINGERS AND TOES!

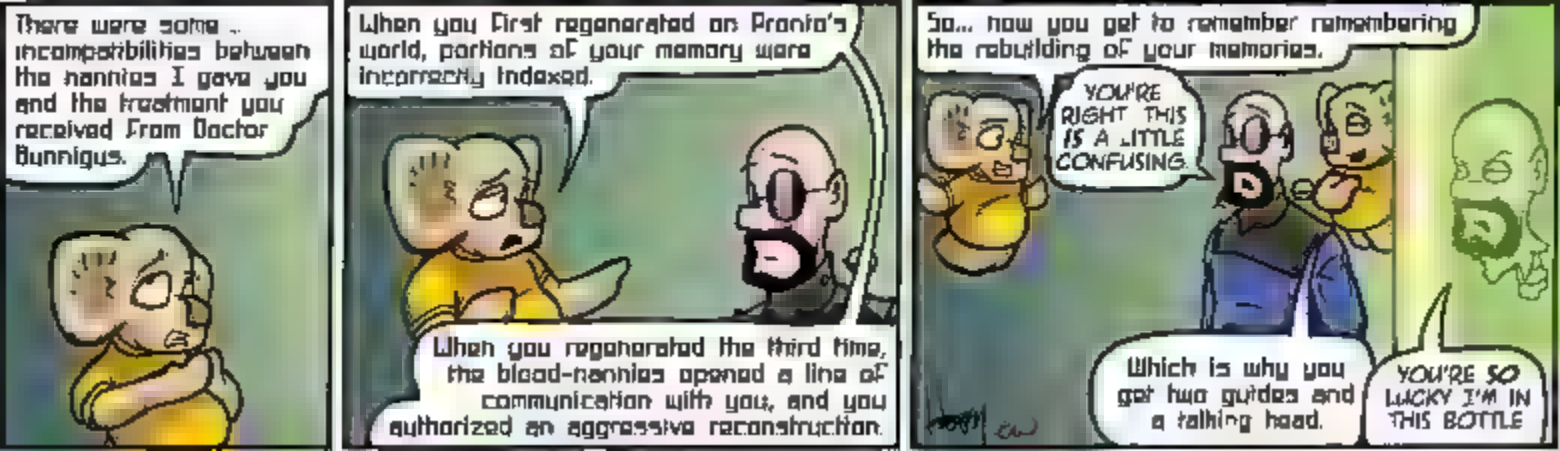

ARE YOU GOING TO HELP US PLAN THE TRIP?
MS. FLINDERS, I'VE GOT TWENTY DUCK-LOBBER GNOMES TO PAINT BEFORE MY NEXT GAME WITH CAPTAIN KEVYN.
NO, I'M NOT USING A FABBER FOR THAT. AND BESIDES, THERE'S A WEDDING ON IN FOUR DAYS, AND I HAVEN'T BROKEN OUT MY DRESS WHITES IN A DOG'S AGE
OH. I'M SORRY TO HAVE
FOUR DAYS FOR PLANNING, AND PAINTING, A QUICK SHOOT-EM-UP AGAINST KEVYN'S GARDEN NINJAS...
... WE LEAVE RIGHT AFTER THE WEDDING.
PACK HEAVY AND DON'T PLAN TO BRING ANY AMMO HOME.

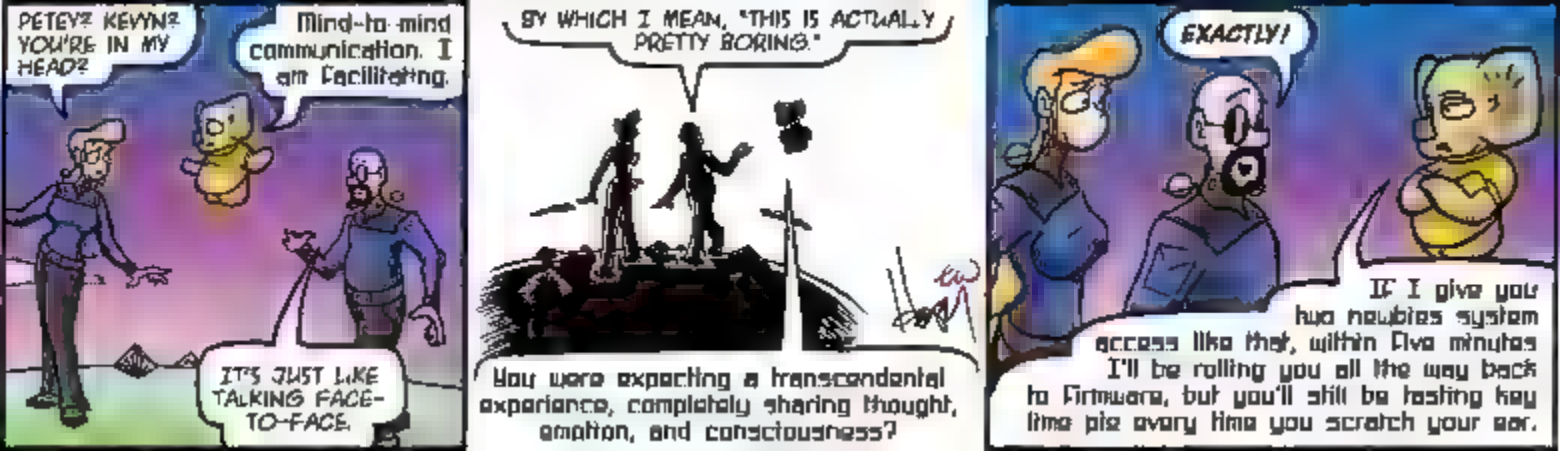

AAAAAAIIIIIEEEEE

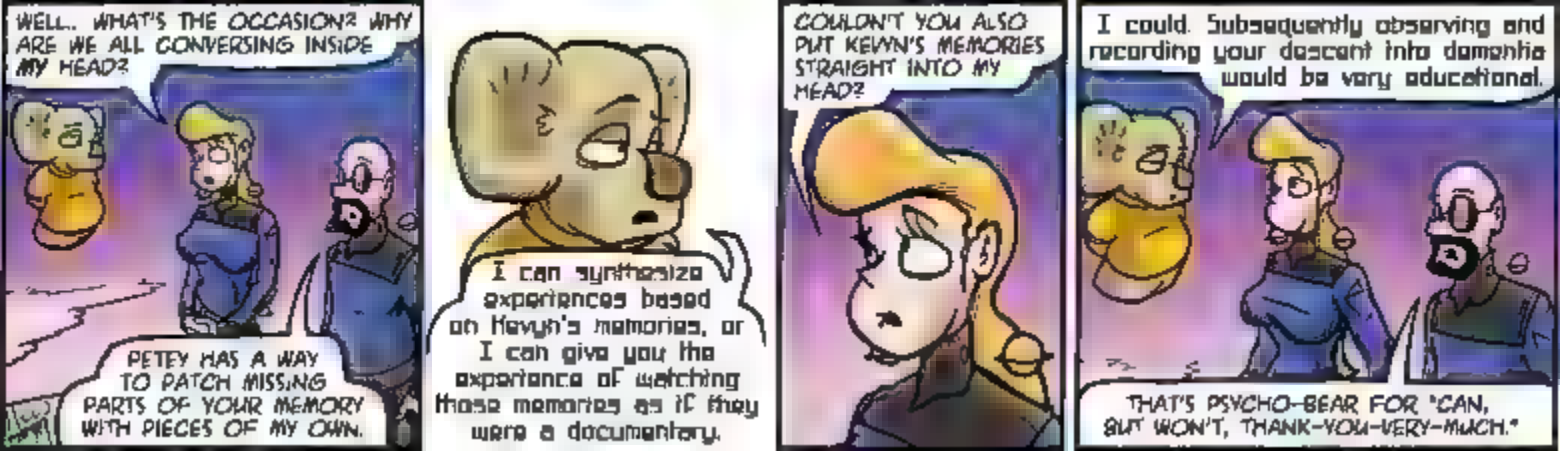

Kevyn, if you dwell on the screaming in your past you may adversely affect your present.
WITH ALL THAT SCREAMING I'M SURPRISED I HAVE A PRESENT TO AFFECT


SO.. HOW COME YOU'RE IN HERE WITH ME?
AND WITH YOU?
WITH ME?
There was an indexing problem. This bit gets kind of confusing.
AS LONG AS IT'S NOT IN MEDIAS RES. THAT'D BE REALLY ANNOYING.

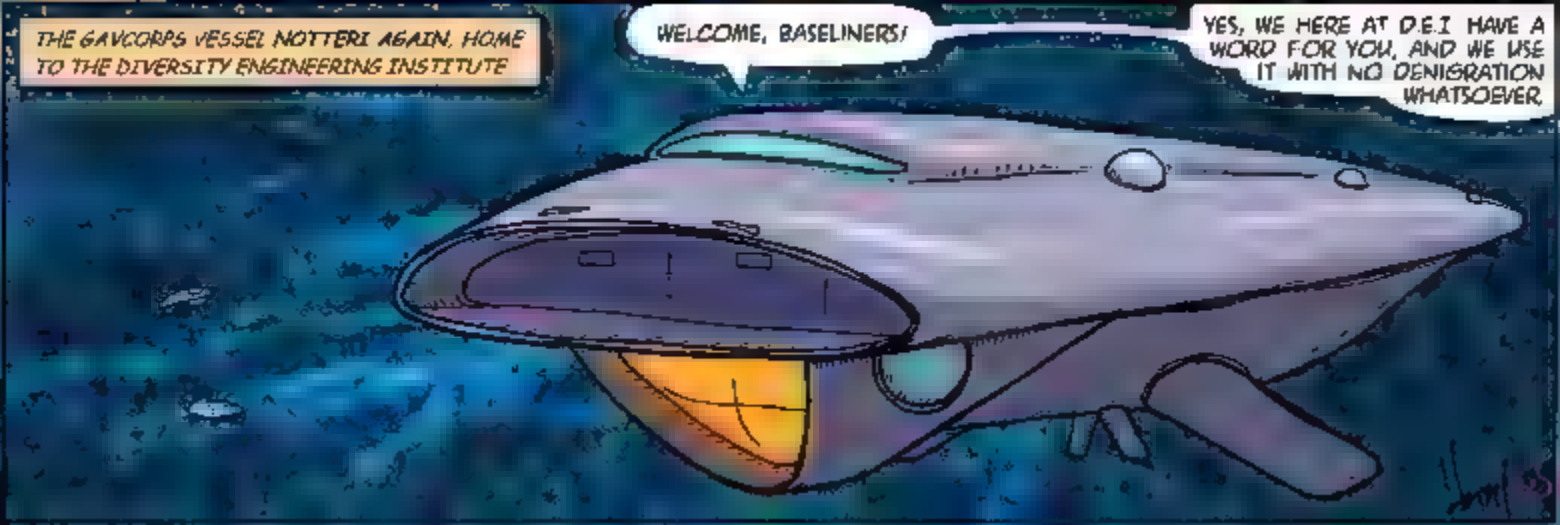

You sustained fatal injuries four times during the mission to root out Shufger and his band of pirates.
Fortunately, you had some advanced prototype blood-nannies, which you acquired from me shortly after I returned you from your deadly misadventure in House Phica.
DIDN'T SERGEANT SCHLOCK BRING ME BACK FROM THE PHICA FOXTROT?
He brought your head back in a nanny-bag. I brought the rest of you back from the dead.
YOU REMEMBER THIS PART, RIGHT?


There were some ... incompatibilities between the nannites I gave you and the treatment you received from Doctor Bunnigus.
When you first regenerated on Pronto's world, portions of your memory were incorrectly indexed.
When you regenerated the third time, the blood-nannites opened a line of communication with you, and you authorized an aggressive reconstruction.
So... now you get to remember remembering the rebuilding of your memories.
YOU'RE RIGHT THIS IS A LITTLE CONFUSING.
Which is why you got two guides and a talking head.
YOU'RE SO LUCKY I'M IN THIS BOTTLE


PETEY? KEVYN? YOU'RE IN MY HEAD?
Mind-to-mind communication. I am facilitating.
IT'S JUST LIKE TALKING FACE-TO-FACE.
BY WHICH I MEAN, "THIS IS ACTUALLY PRETTY BORING."
You were expecting a transcendental experience, completely sharing thought, emotion, and consciousness?
EXACTLY!
IF I give you two newbies system access like that, within five minutes I'll be rolling you all the way back to firmware, but you'll still be tasting key lime pie every time you scratch your ear.

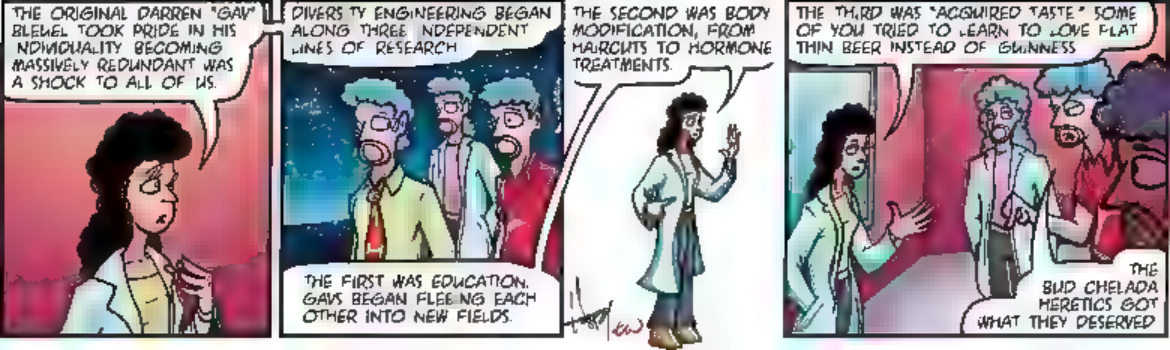

WELL.. WHAT'S THE OCCASION? WHY ARE WE ALL CONVERSING INSIDE MY HEAD?
PETEY HAS A WAY TO PATCH MISSING PARTS OF YOUR MEMORY WITH PIECES OF MY OWN.
I can synthesize experiences based on Kevyn's memories, or I can give you the experience of watching those memories as if they were a documentary.
COULDN'T YOU ALSO PUT KEVYN'S MEMORIES STRAIGHT INTO MY HEAD?
I could. Subsequently observing and recording your descent into dementia would be very educational.
THAT'S PSYCHO-BEAR FOR "CAN, BUT WON'T, THANK-YOU-VERY-MUCH."

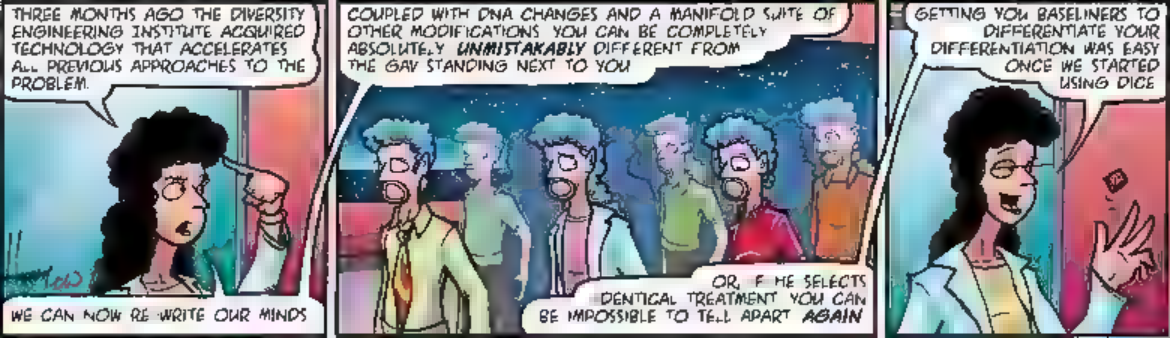

YOU DON'T HAVE TO HAVE THIS PARTICULAR MEMORY EDIT YOU CAN CHOOSE NOT TO KNOW WHAT REALLY HAPPENED
YOU'LL TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED, THOUGH. RIGHT?
OF COURSE.
AND IT WILL BE SUCH A GREAT STORY I'LL WISH I COULD SEE THE MOVIE INSTEAD OF HAVING YOU READ ME THE BOOK?
THE SCENE WHERE I KILL A TANK WITH MY BARE HANDS GIVES ME CHILLS.
Movie it is, then.

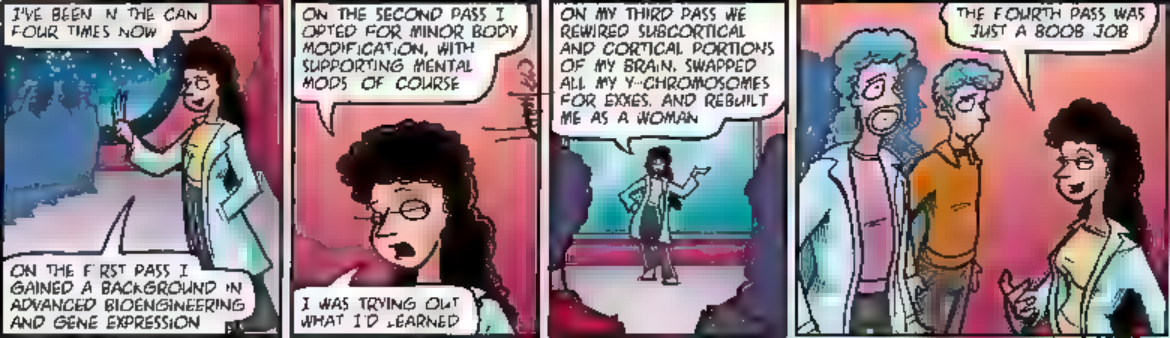

THE GAVCORPS VESSEL NOTTERI AGAIN. HOME TO THE DIVERSITY ENGINEERING INSTITUTE
WELCOME, BASELINERS!
YES, WE HERE AT D.E.I HAVE A WORD FOR YOU, AND WE USE IT WITH NO DENIGRATION WHATSOEVER.

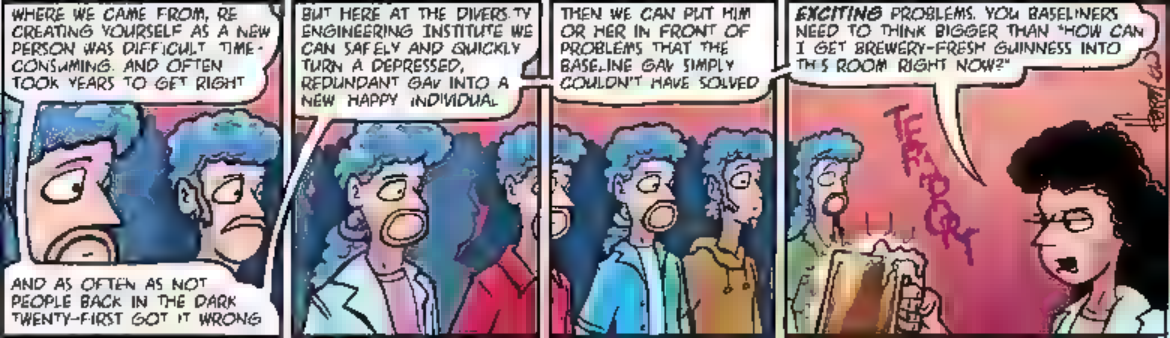

YOU WERE TOLD AS A CHILD THAT YOU WERE SPECIAL, YOU WERE UNIQUE, AND THAT NOBODY ELSE BUT YOU COULD BE YOU.
ONE FROZEN MILLENNIUM LATER YOU ACCIDENTALLY CREATED A WORLD IN WHICH, FOR YOU AT LEAST, THAT WAS NOT TRUE.

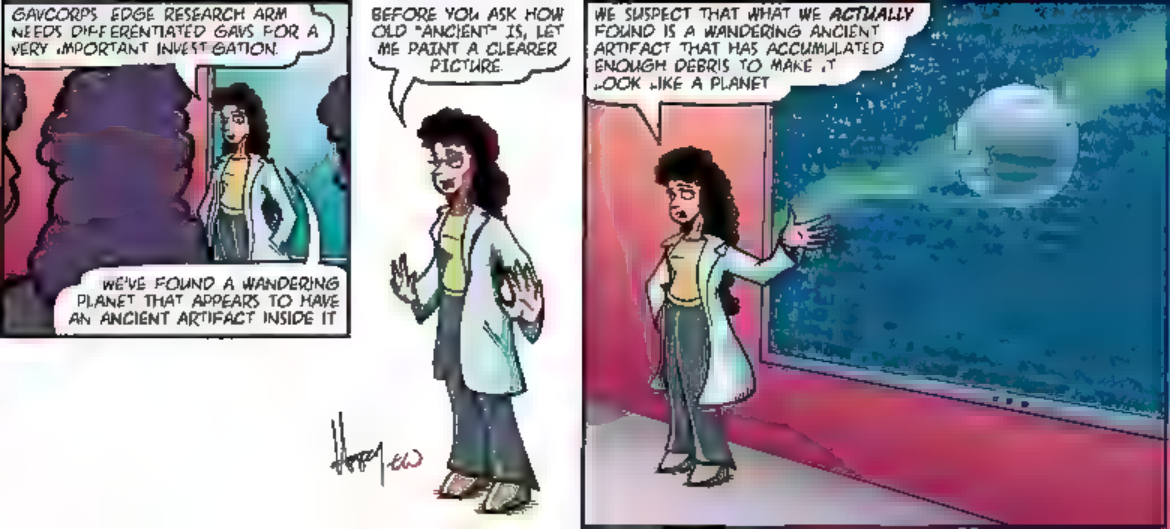

YOU'RE **NOT** UNIQUE ANYMORE HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF PEOPLE CAN BE YOU SO CONVINCINGLY THAT SOMETIMES YOU LIE AWAKE AND WONDER IF PERHAPS THERE REALLY IS A SPIRITUAL COMPONENT TO HUMANITY, A SOUL. BECAUSE IT FEELS LIKE THE GATE-CLONING SOMEHOW STRETCHED YOURS ACROSS NINE HUNDRED AND FIFTY MILLION REANIMATED CORPSICLES.
I KNOW THIS BECAUSE I USED TO BE A BASELINER. *I WAS YOU.*
PLEASE HOLD YOUR QUESTIONS UNTIL THE END OF THE PRESENTATION. WE ALREADY KNOW WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO ASK.
ILLUSTRATING WHY ALL OF YOU ARE HERE TO BEGIN WITH..


THE ORIGINAL DARREN "GAV" BLEWEL TOOK PRIDE IN HIS INDIVIDUALITY BECOMING MASSIVELY REDUNDANT WAS A SHOCK TO ALL OF US.
DIVERS TY ENGINEERING BEGAN ALONG THREE NDEPENDENT LINES OF RESEARCH
THE FIRST WAS EDUCATION. GAVS BEGAN FLEE NG EACH OTHER INTO NEW FIELDS.
THE SECOND WAS BODY MODIFICATION, FROM HAIRCUTS TO HORMONE TREATMENTS.
THE THIRD WAS "ACQUIRED TASTE." SOME OF YOU TRIED TO LEARN TO LOVE FLAT THIN BEER INSTEAD OF GUINNESS
THE BUD CHELADA HERETICS GOT WHAT THEY DESERVED


THREE MONTHS AGO THE DIVERSITY ENGINEERING INSTITUTE ACQUIRED TECHNOLOGY THAT ACCELERATES ALL PREVIOUS APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM.
WE CAN NOW RE-WRITE OUR MINDS
COUPLED WITH DNA CHANGES AND A MANIFOLD SUITE OF OTHER MODIFICATIONS YOU CAN BE COMPLETELY ABSOLUTELY UNMISTAKABLY DIFFERENT FROM THE GAY STANDING NEXT TO YOU
OR, IF HE SELECTS IDENTICAL TREATMENT YOU CAN BE IMPOSSIBLE TO TELL APART AGAIN
GETTING YOU BASELINERS TO DIFFERENTIATE YOUR DIFFERENTIATION WAS EASY ONCE WE STARTED USING DICE


I'VE BEEN IN THE CAN FOUR TIMES NOW
ON THE FIRST PASS I GAINED A BACKGROUND IN ADVANCED BIOENGINEERING AND GENE EXPRESSION
ON THE SECOND PASS I OPTED FOR MINOR BODY MODIFICATION, WITH SUPPORTING MENTAL MODS OF COURSE
I WAS TRYING OUT WHAT I'D LEARNED
ON MY THIRD PASS WE REWIRED SUBCORTICAL AND CORTICAL PORTIONS OF MY BRAIN, SWAPPED ALL MY Y-CHROMOSOMES FOR EXXES, AND REBUILT ME AS A WOMAN
THE FOURTH PASS WAS JUST A BOOB JOB


WHERE WE CAME FROM, RE CREATING YOURSELF AS A NEW PERSON WAS DIFFICULT. TIME-CONSUMING. AND OFTEN TOOK YEARS TO GET RIGHT
AND AS OFTEN AS NOT PEOPLE BACK IN THE DARK TWENTY-FIRST GOT IT WRONG
BUT HERE AT THE DIVERSITY ENGINEERING INSTITUTE WE CAN SAFELY AND QUICKLY TURN A DEPRESSED, REDUNDANT GAY INTO A NEW HAPPY INDIVIDUAL
THEN WE CAN PUT HIM OR HER IN FRONT OF PROBLEMS THAT THE BASELINE GAY SIMPLY COULDN'T HAVE SOLVED
EXCITING PROBLEMS. YOU BASELINERS NEED TO THINK BIGGER THAN "HOW CAN I GET BREWERY-FRESH GUINNESS INTO THIS ROOM RIGHT NOW?"
TEA-DOR


GAVCORPS EDGE RESEARCH ARM NEEDS DIFFERENTIATED GAVS FOR A VERY IMPORTANT INVESTIGATION.
WE'VE FOUND A WANDERING PLANET THAT APPEARS TO HAVE AN ANCIENT ARTIFACT INSIDE IT
BEFORE YOU ASK HOW OLD "ANCIENT" IS, LET ME PAINT A CLEARER PICTURE.
WE SUSPECT THAT WHAT WE ACTUALLY FOUND IS A WANDERING ANCIENT ARTIFACT THAT HAS ACCUMULATED ENOUGH DEBRIS TO MAKE IT LOOK LIKE A PLANET

WE'RE OFFERING EACH OF YOU THE CHANCE TO BE UNIQUE AGAIN, AND TO DO SOMETHING IMPORTANT AND INTERESTING WITH YOUR LIFE.

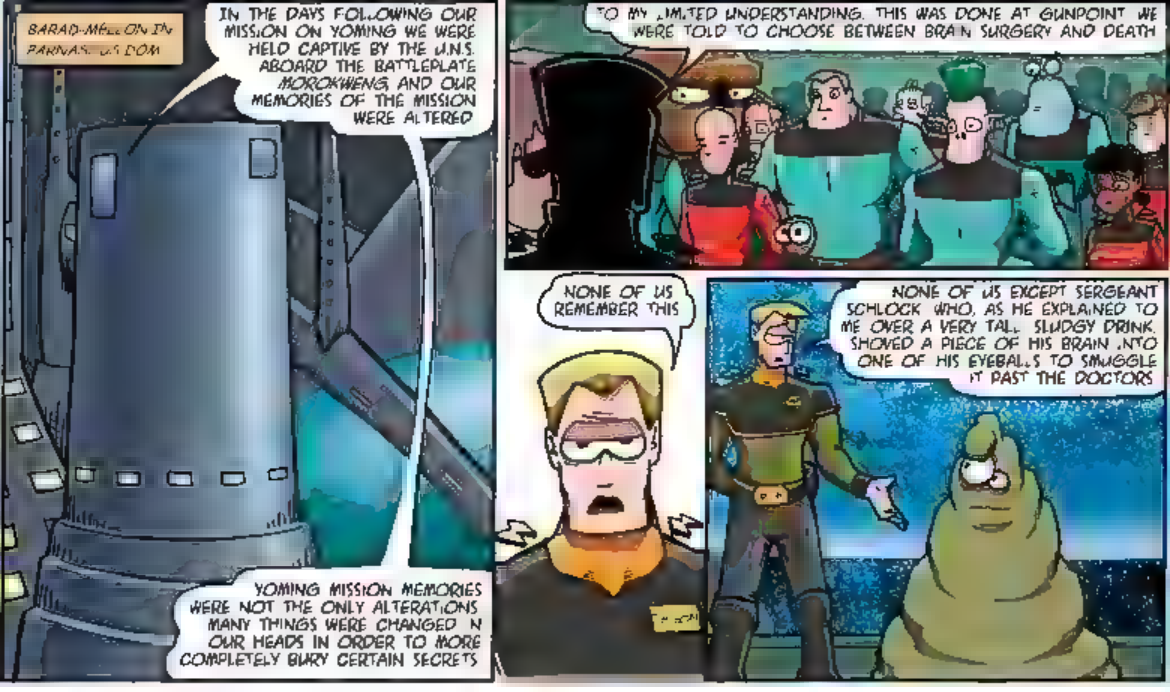
WHO WANTS TO CLIMB INTO THE CAN FIRST?



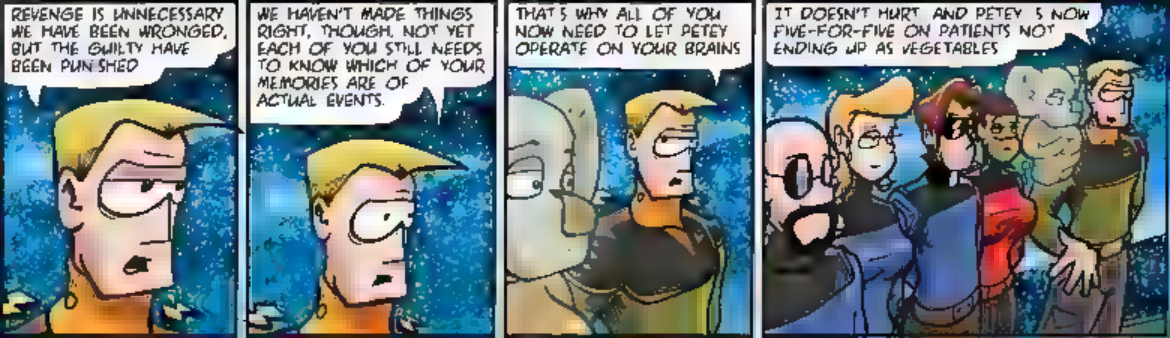
I MAY HAVE NEGLECTED TO MENTION THAT THE PROPER NAME FOR "THE CAN" IS "THE TRANSMOGRIFIER."

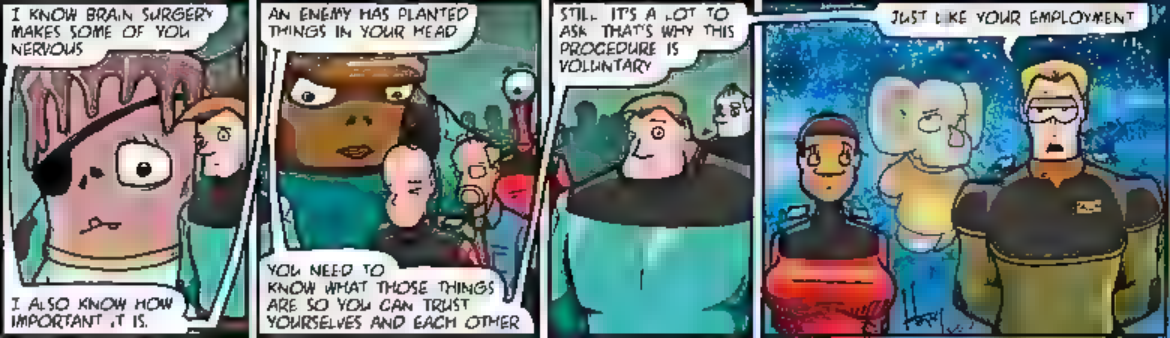
IS THE SIGN MADE OUT OF CARDBOARD?

OF COURSE IT IS

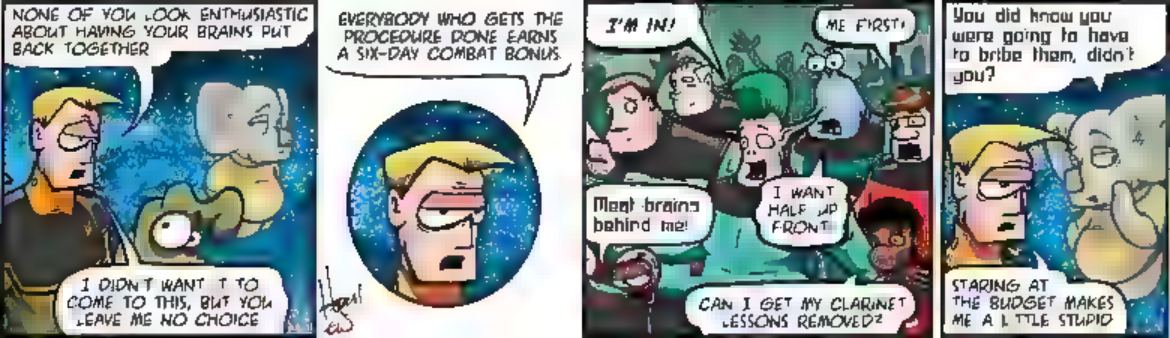

BARAD-MELLON IN PARNASSUS DOM
IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING OUR MISSION ON YOMING WE WERE HELD CAPTIVE BY THE U.N.S. ABOARD THE BATTLEPLATE MOROKWENG, AND OUR MEMORIES OF THE MISSION WERE ALTERED
YOMING MISSION MEMORIES WERE NOT THE ONLY ALTERATIONS MANY THINGS WERE CHANGED IN OUR HEADS IN ORDER TO MORE COMPLETELY BURY CERTAIN SECRETS
TO MY LIMITED UNDERSTANDING, THIS WAS DONE AT GUNPOINT WE WERE TOLD TO CHOOSE BETWEEN BRAIN SURGERY AND DEATH
NONE OF US REMEMBER THIS
NONE OF US EXCEPT SERGEANT SCHLOCK WHO, AS HE EXPLAINED TO ME OVER A VERY TALL SLUDGY DRINK, SHOVED A PIECE OF HIS BRAIN INTO ONE OF HIS EYEBALLS TO SMUGGLE IT PAST THE DOCTORS

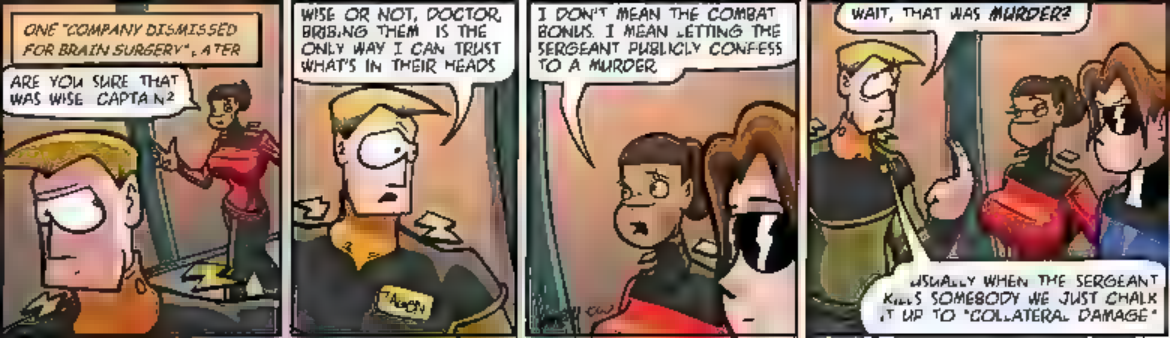

SEVERAL DAYS AGO PETEY USED THAT INFORMATION TO IDENTIFY WHICH OF MY MEMORIES WERE ARTIFICIAL
SEVERAL WEEKS AGO SERGEANT SCHLOCK USED THAT INFORMATION TO "ELIMINATE" THE DOCTOR RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PROJECT AND "DISPOSE" OF THE BODY
Ennesby gave me a shorter word to say all that sir
Assassinated
ENNESBY NEEDS TO STOP INVENTING WORDS.

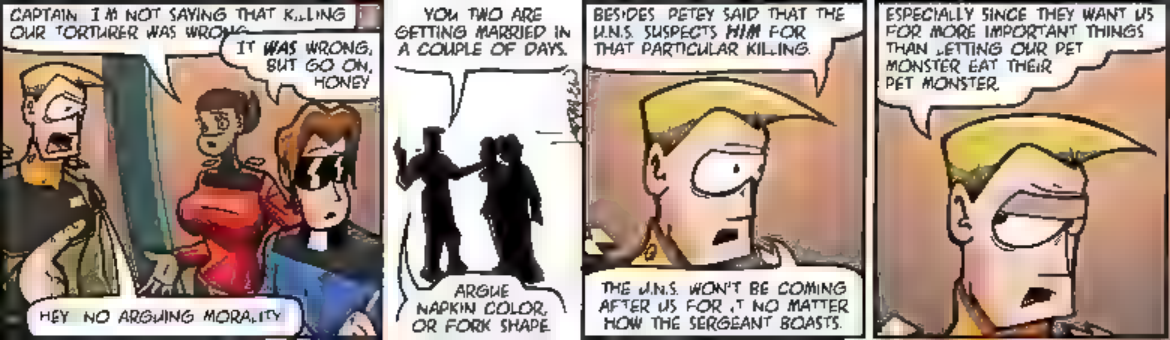

REVENGE IS UNNECESSARY WE HAVE BEEN WRONGED, BUT THE GUILTY HAVE BEEN PUNISHED
WE HAVEN'T MADE THINGS RIGHT, THOUGH. NOT YET EACH OF YOU STILL NEEDS TO KNOW WHICH OF YOUR MEMORIES ARE OF ACTUAL EVENTS.
THAT'S WHY ALL OF YOU NOW NEED TO LET PETEY OPERATE ON YOUR BRAINS
IT DOESN'T HURT AND PETEY'S NOW FIVE-FOR-FIVE ON PATIENTS NOT ENDING UP AS VEGETABLES


I KNOW BRAIN SURGERY MAKES SOME OF YOU NERVOUS
I ALSO KNOW HOW IMPORTANT ,T IS.
AN ENEMY HAS PLANTED THINGS IN YOUR HEAD
YOU NEED TO KNOW WHAT THOSE THINGS ARE SO YOU CAN TRUST YOURSELVES AND EACH OTHER
STILL IT'S A LOT TO ASK THAT'S WHY THIS PROCEDURE IS VOLUNTARY
JUST LIKE YOUR EMPLOYMENT

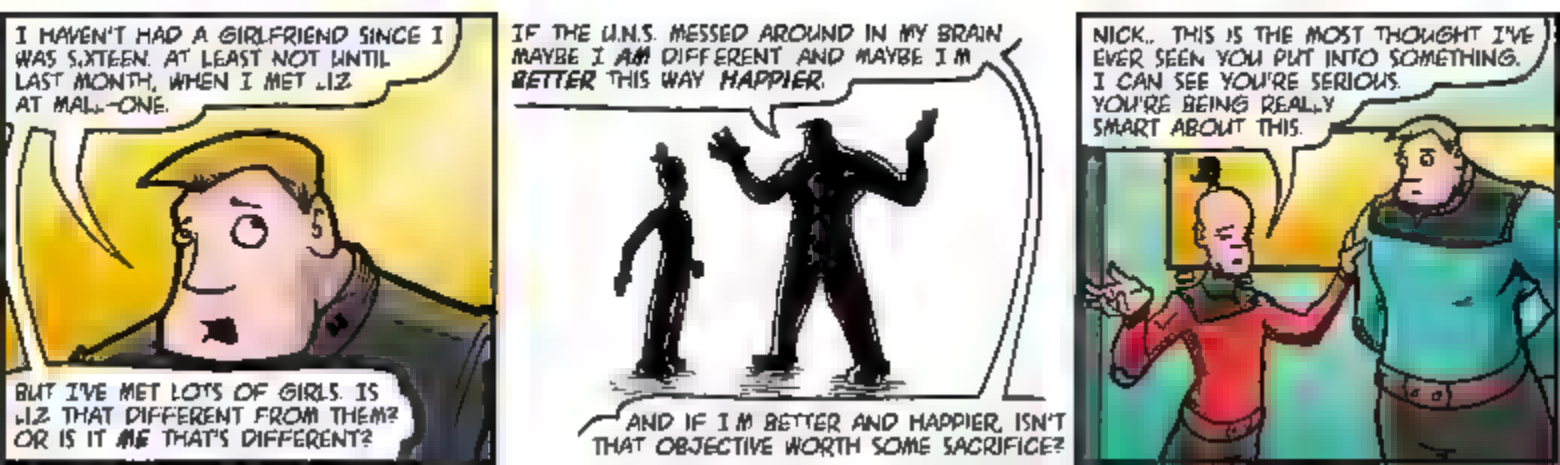

SIR, ARE YOU SAYING THAT IF WE DON'T GO UNDER THE KNIFE WE'RE FIRED?
LET ME PUT THIS DIFFERENTLY. I WENT FIRST. DOC BUNNIGUS AND HER FIANCE THE REVEREND WENT NEXT. THEN COMMANDERS ANDREYASN AND FOXWORTHY HAD IT DONE
IF YOU DON'T TRUST THE DOCTOR, THE REVEREND, AND YOUR SENIOR OFFICERS, YOU SHOULD PROBABLY QUIT
YOUR CAPTAIN IS LEADING FROM IN FRONT PEOPLE!
"MAXIM 18 IF THE OFFICERS ARE LEADING FROM IN FRONT WATCH OUT FOR AN ATTACK FROM THE REAR."
TOP HELPING, DOCTOR


NONE OF YOU LOOK ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT HAVING YOUR BRAINS PUT BACK TOGETHER
I DIDN'T WANT T TO COME TO THIS, BUT YOU LEAVE ME NO CHOICE
EVERYBODY WHO GETS THE PROCEDURE DONE EARNS A SIX-DAY COMBAT BONUS.
I'M IN!
ME FIRST!
Meat brains behind me!
I WANT HALF UP FRONT
CAN I GET MY CLARINET LESSONS REMOVED?
You did know you were going to have to bribe them, didn't you?
STARING AT THE BUDGET MAKES ME A LITTLE STUPID

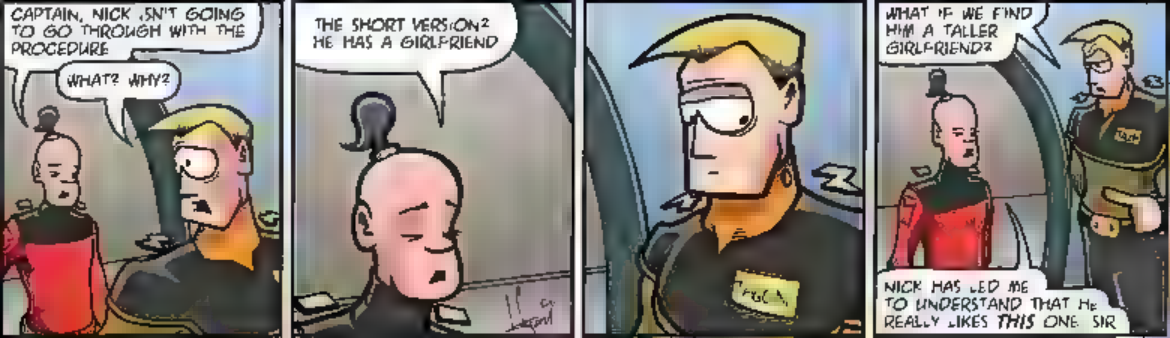

ONE "COMPANY DISMISSED FOR BRAIN SURGERY", AFTER
ARE YOU SURE THAT WAS WISE CAPTAIN?
WISE OR NOT, DOCTOR BRIBING THEM IS THE ONLY WAY I CAN TRUST WHAT'S IN THEIR HEADS
I DON'T MEAN THE COMBAT BONUS. I MEAN LETTING THE SERGEANT PUBLICLY CONFESS TO A MURDER.
WAIT, THAT WAS MURDER?
USUALLY WHEN THE SERGEANT KILLS SOMEBODY WE JUST CHALK IT UP TO "COLLATERAL DAMAGE"


CAPTAIN. I'M NOT SAYING THAT KILLING OUR TORTURER WAS WRONG.
IT WAS WRONG, BUT GO ON, HONEY.
HEY. NO ARGUING MORALITY
YOU TWO ARE GETTING MARRIED IN A COUPLE OF DAYS.
ARGUE NAPKIN COLOR, OR FORK SHAPE.
BESIDES PETEY SAID THAT THE U.N.S. SUSPECTS HIM FOR THAT PARTICULAR KILLING.
THE U.N.S. WON'T BE COMING AFTER US FOR IT NO MATTER HOW THE SERGEANT BOASTS.
ESPECIALLY SINCE THEY WANT US FOR MORE IMPORTANT THINGS THAN GETTING OUR PET MONSTER EAT THEIR PET MONSTER.


OUTSIDE THE OPERATING THEATER
NICK, THERE'S NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF
SORRY, LIEUTENANT COMMANDER. I JUST CAN'T
CORPORAL NICHOLSON, THIS WILL COST YOU YOUR JOB. YOU KNOW THAT, RIGHT?
SACRIFICES GOTTA BE MADE FOR THE OBJECTIVE, YOU KNOW?
WHAT OBJECTIVE? NICK, TELL ME WHAT'S GOING ON!

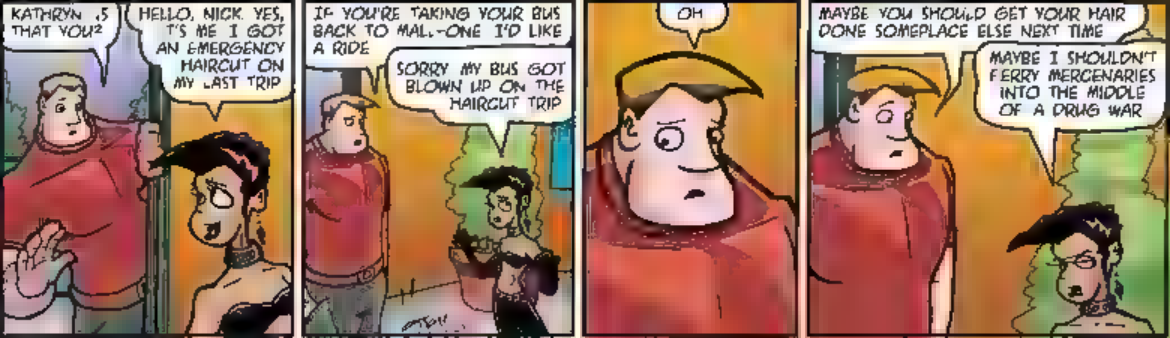

I HAVEN'T HAD A GIRLFRIEND SINCE I WAS SIXTEEN. AT LEAST NOT UNTIL LAST MONTH, WHEN I MET LIZ AT MALL-ONE.
BUT I'VE MET LOTS OF GIRLS. IS LIZ THAT DIFFERENT FROM THEM? OR IS IT ME THAT'S DIFFERENT?
IF THE U.N.S. MESSED AROUND IN MY BRAIN MAYBE I AM DIFFERENT AND MAYBE I'M BETTER THIS WAY HAPPIER.
AND IF I'M BETTER AND HAPPIER, ISN'T THAT OBJECTIVE WORTH SOME SACRIFICE?
NICK.. THIS IS THE MOST THOUGHT I'VE EVER SEEN YOU PUT INTO SOMETHING. I CAN SEE YOU'RE SERIOUS. YOU'RE BEING REALLY SMART ABOUT THIS.


BUT DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE THE U.N.S. MESSED WITH YOU IN ORDER TO MAKE YOU A BETTER, HAPPIER PERSON? THEY'RE NOT THAT COMPETENT, MUCH LESS THAT BENIGN.
BE NINE OF WHAT?
SEE, THAT'S MORE LIKE YOUR USUAL LEVEL OF COGNITION, CORPORAL. I'M CONFIDENT THAT DOWN DEEP YOU'RE THE SAME PERSON YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN.
NINE OF WHAT?

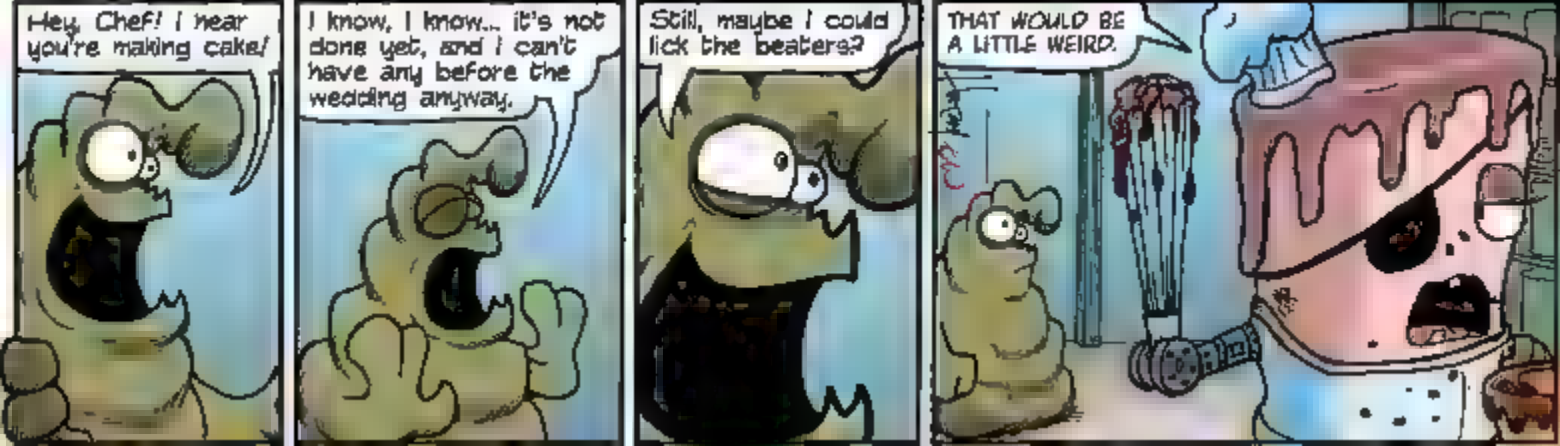

CAPTAIN, NICK ISN'T GOING TO GO THROUGH WITH THE PROCEDURE
WHAT? WHY?
THE SHORT VERSION? HE HAS A GIRLFRIEND
WHAT IF WE FIND HIM A TALLER GIRLFRIEND?
NICK HAS LED ME TO UNDERSTAND THAT HE REALLY LIKES THIS ONE SIR

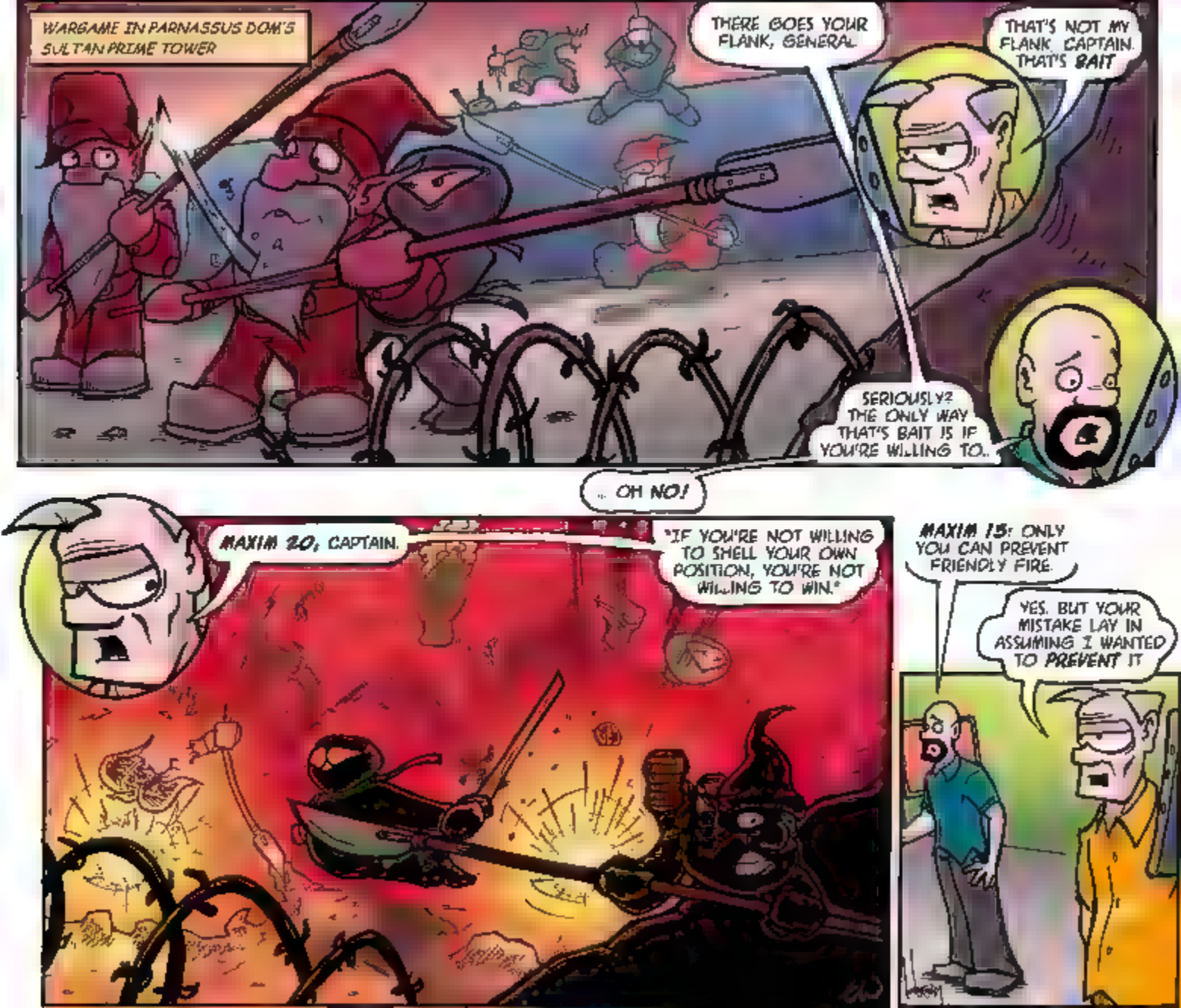

YOU WANTED TO SEE ME CAPTAIN?
YES, CORPORAL
I'VE NEVER HAD TO DO THIS BEFORE. USUALLY PEOPLE LEAVE THE COMPANY BECAUSE THEY'RE DEAD.
DELIVERING THOSE NOTIFICATIONS IS HARD, BUT AT LEAST I CAN USUALLY SAY "I DID ALL I COULD."
AND I CAN ALWAYS SAY "I'M SORRY" AND ACTUALLY MEAN .T
ANYWAY YOU'RE FIRED
AND UM.. I'M SORRY

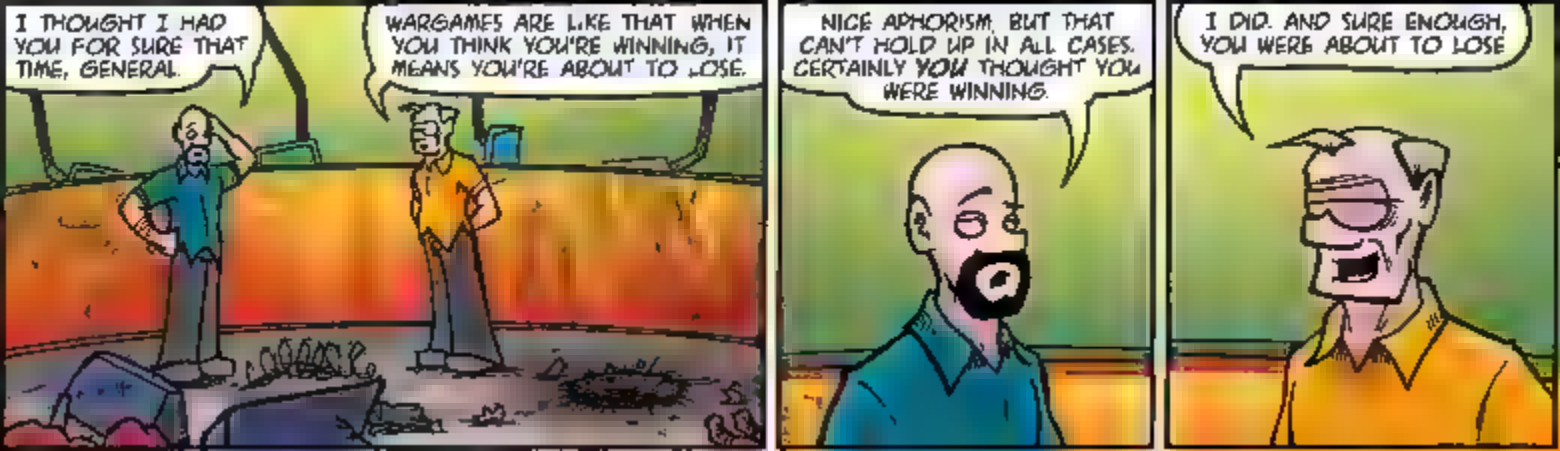

TURN IN YOUR UNIFORM AND ISSUED WEAPONS AND ARMOR TO CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER THURL
GO HAVE A NICE LONG LIFE WHERE NOBODY SHOOTS AT YOU.
I'M GOING BACK TO MALL-ONE TO SEE LIZ.
KEEP THE WEAPONS AND ONE SET OF ARMOR. IF SOMEBODY DOES SHOOT AT YOU, SHOOT BACK

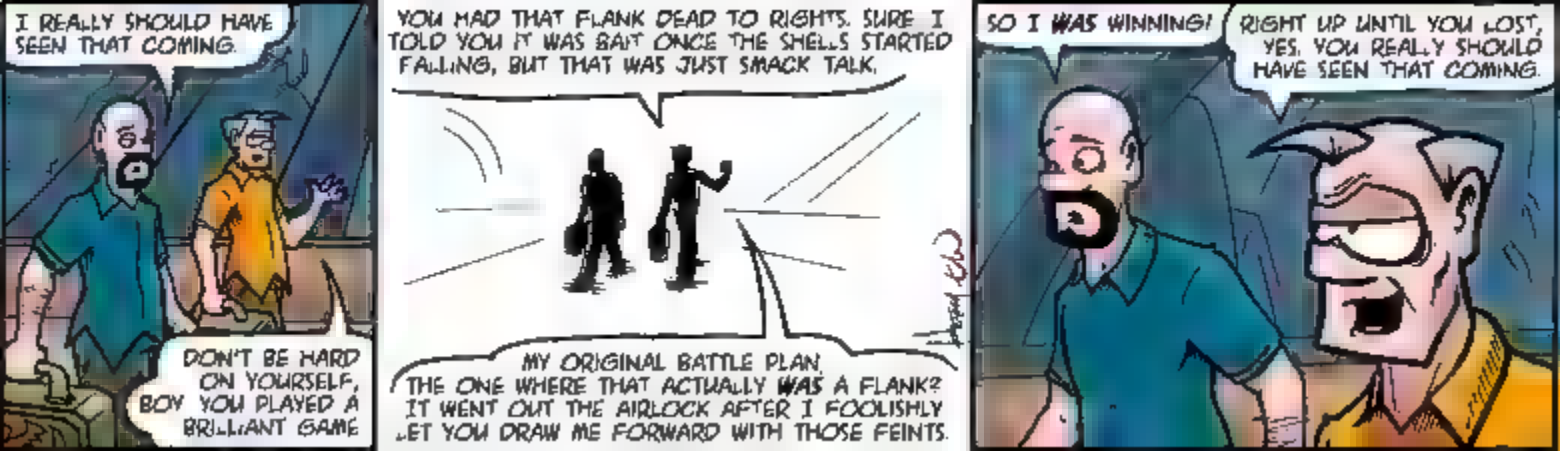

KATHRYN ,S THAT YOU?
HELLO, NICK. YES, T'S ME I GOT AN EMERGENCY HAIRCUT ON MY LAST TRIP
IF YOU'RE TAKING YOUR BUS BACK TO MAL-ONE I'D LIKE A RIDE
SORRY MY BUS GOT BLOWN UP ON THE HAIRCUT TRIP
OH
MAYBE YOU SHOULD GET YOUR HAIR DONE SOMEPLACE ELSE NEXT TIME
MAYBE I SHOULDN'T FERRY MERCENARIES INTO THE MIDDLE OF A DRUG WAR


All done, Ennesby.
Wow. Those memory edits were insidious.
Thanks for putting me back toge- hey..
I'm still attached to an oversized hand
Tailor's got a tux fitted for it. This way you'll actually wear formal attire to the wedding.

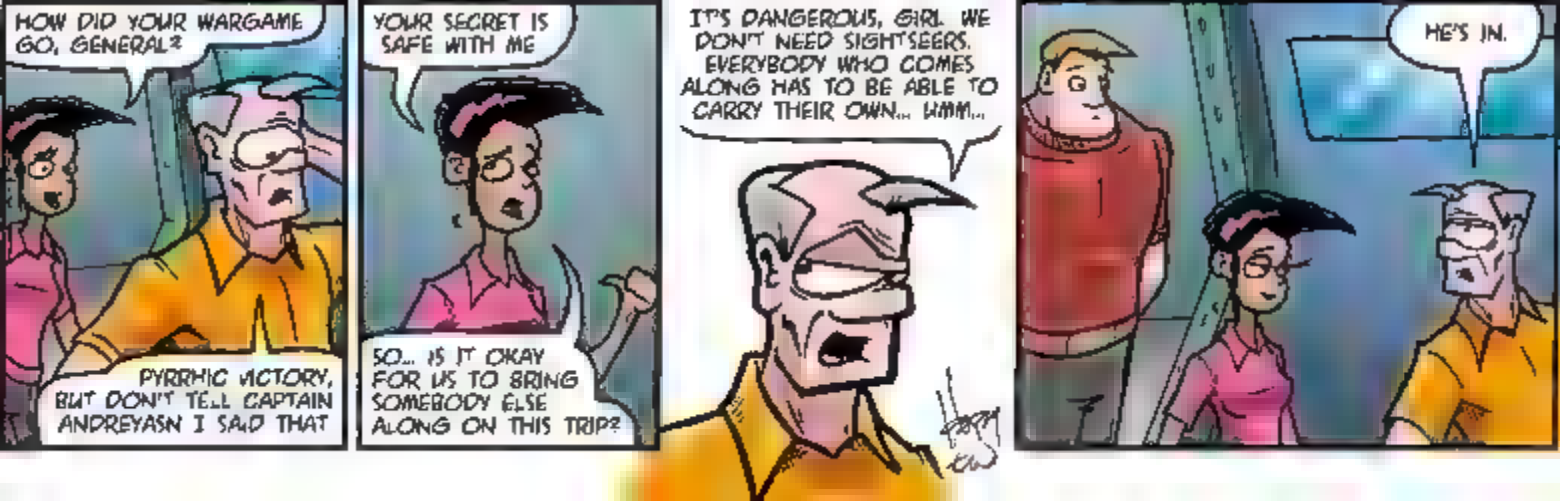

Hey, Chef! I hear you're making cake!
I know, I know... it's not done yet, and I can't have any before the wedding anyway.
Still, maybe I could lick the beaters?
THAT WOULD BE A LITTLE WEIRD.


WARGAME IN PARNASSUS DOM'S SULTAN PRIME TOWER
THERE GOES YOUR FLANK, GENERAL
THAT'S NOT MY FLANK, CAPTAIN. THAT'S BAIT
SERIOUSLY? THE ONLY WAY THAT'S BAIT IS IF YOU'RE WILLING TO..
.. OH NO!
MAXIM 20, CAPTAIN.
"IF YOU'RE NOT WILLING TO SHELL YOUR OWN POSITION, YOU'RE NOT WILLING TO WIN."
MAXIM 15: ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT FRIENDLY FIRE.
YES. BUT YOUR MISTAKE LAY IN ASSUMING I WANTED TO PREVENT IT

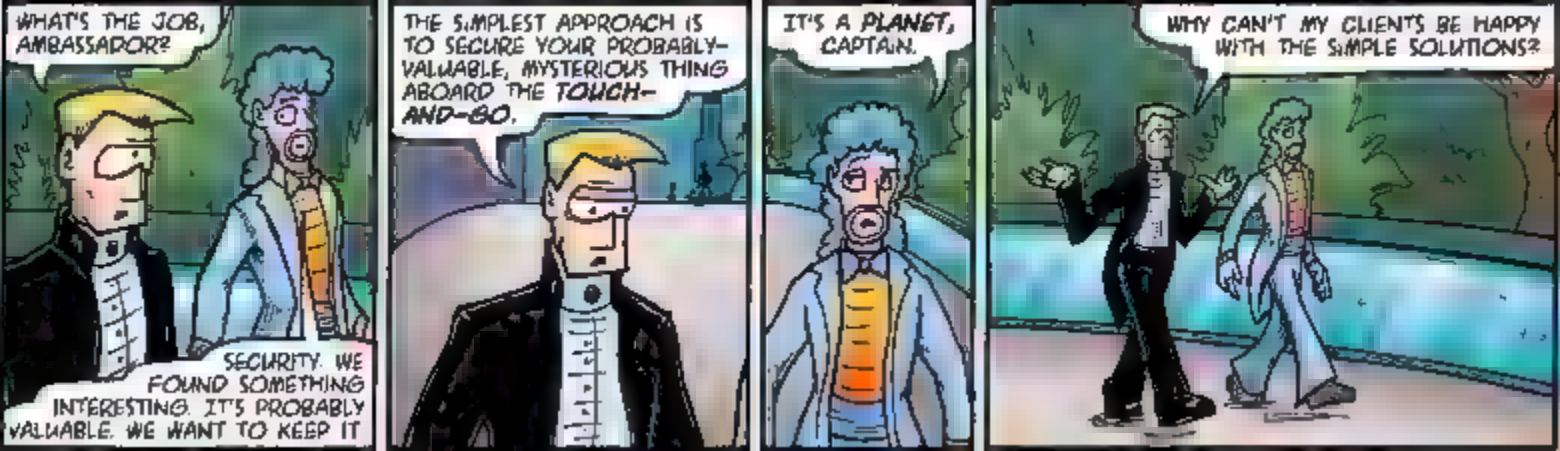

I THOUGHT I HAD YOU FOR SURE THAT TIME, GENERAL.
WARGAMES ARE LIKE THAT WHEN YOU THINK YOU'RE WINNING, IT MEANS YOU'RE ABOUT TO LOSE.
NICE APHORISM, BUT THAT CAN'T HOLD UP IN ALL CASES. CERTAINLY *YOU* THOUGHT YOU WERE WINNING.
I DID. AND SURE ENOUGH, YOU WERE ABOUT TO LOSE

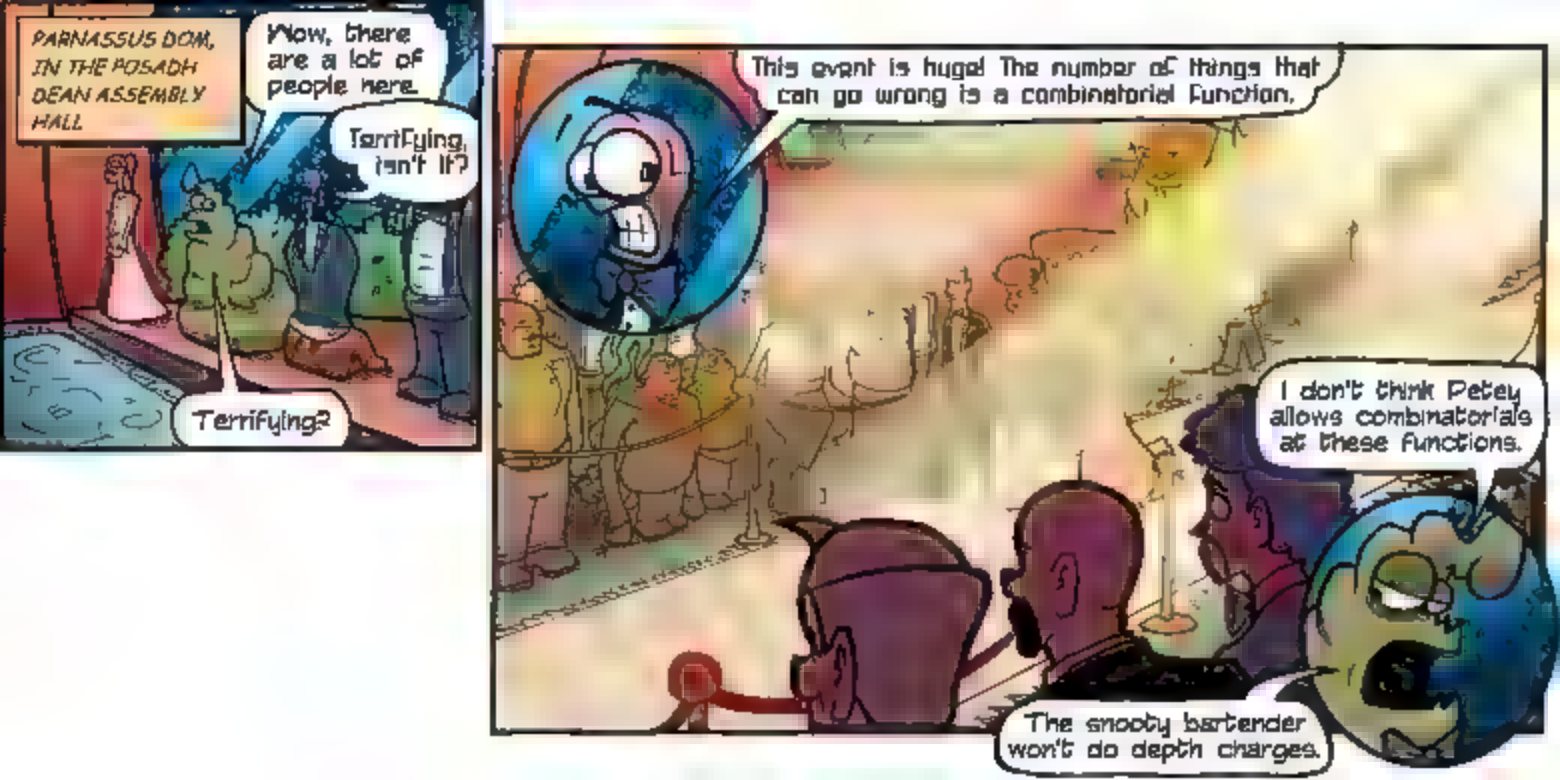

I REALLY SHOULD HAVE SEEN THAT COMING.
DON'T BE HARD ON YOURSELF, BOY YOU PLAYED A BRILLIANT GAME
YOU MAD THAT FLANK DEAD TO RIGHTS. SURE I TOLD YOU IT WAS BAIT ONCE THE SHELLS STARTED FALLING, BUT THAT WAS JUST SMACK TALK.
MY ORIGINAL BATTLE PLAN. THE ONE WHERE THAT ACTUALLY WAS A FLANK? IT WENT OUT THE AIRLOCK AFTER I FOOLISHLY LET YOU DRAW ME FORWARD WITH THOSE FEINTS.
SO I WAS WINNING!
RIGHT UP UNTIL YOU LOST, YES. YOU REALLY SHOULD HAVE SEEN THAT COMING.

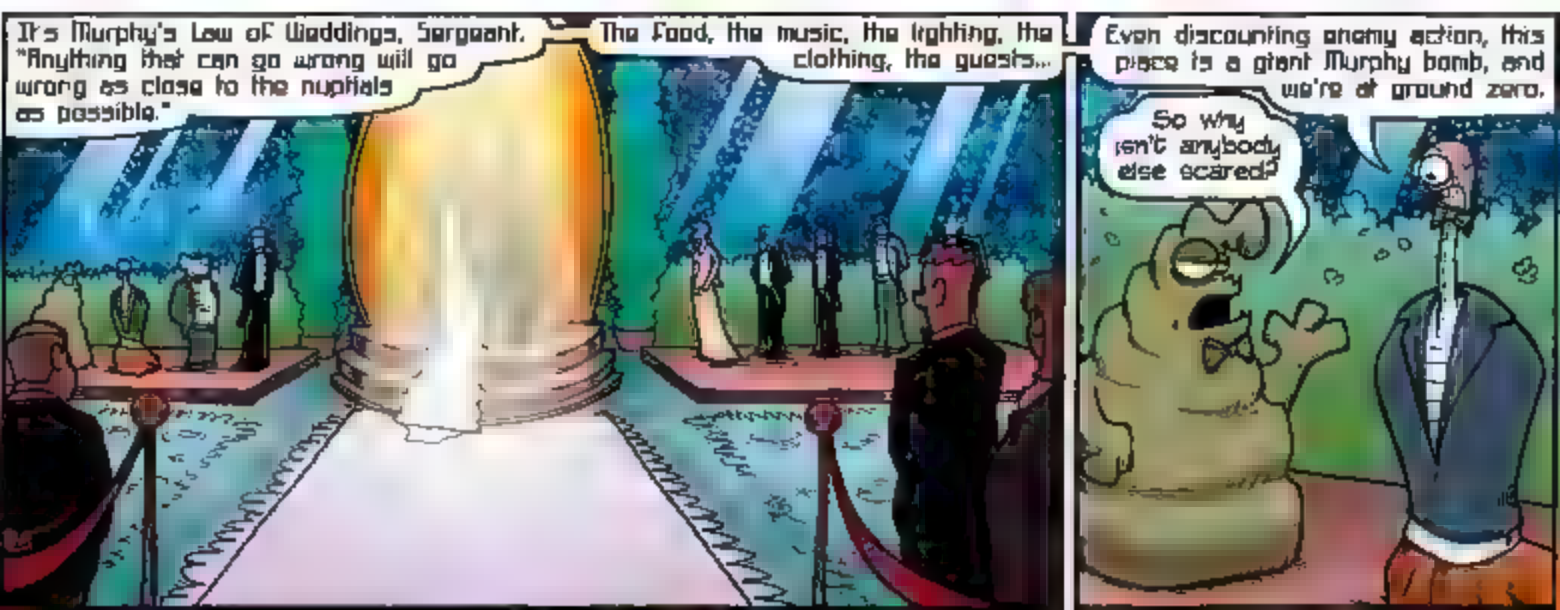

IF YOU MADE A MISTAKE, IT WAS THAT YOU BELIEVED I LOVED THOSE LITTLE, HAND-PAINTED PIKE GNOMES TOO MUCH TO SELL THEM.
AND, WELL... I DID LOVE 'EM. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN IMMORAL TO SACRIFICE THEM LIKE THAT IF I DIDN'T
IF YOU HATE SOMEBODY BUSING THEM TO BAIT A TRAP MIGHT AS WELL BE MURDER.
IF THERE HAS TO BE A SACRIFICE, AND IT CAN'T BE YOU, IT HAD BETTER BE SOMEBODY YOU LIKE.
DO YOU HAVE MANY FRIENDS, GENERAL?
LIVING? NO, NOT REALLY

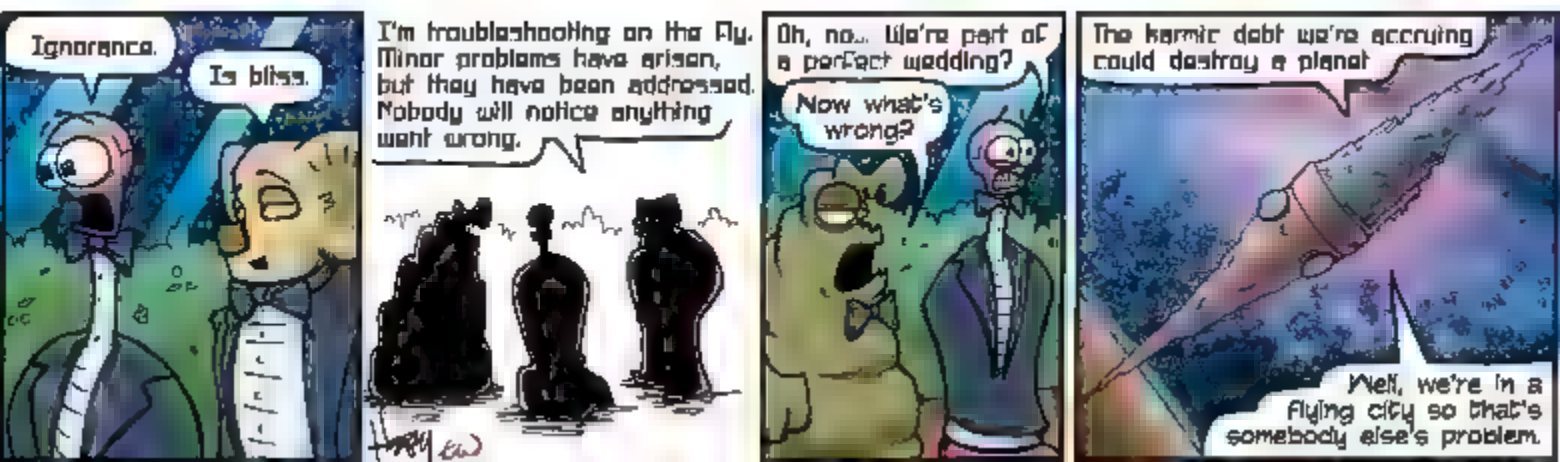

HOW DID YOUR WARGAME GO, GENERAL?
PYRRHIC VICTORY, BUT DON'T TELL CAPTAIN ANDREYASN I SAID THAT
YOUR SECRET IS SAFE WITH ME
SO... IS IT OKAY FOR US TO BRING SOMEBODY ELSE ALONG ON THIS TRIP?
IT'S DANGEROUS, GIRL. WE DON'T NEED SIGHTSEERS. EVERYBODY WHO COMES ALONG HAS TO BE ABLE TO CARRY THEIR OWN... UMM...
HE'S IN.


CAPTAIN TAGON, IS YOUR COMPANY AVAILABLE FOR HIRE?
PETEY'S SHIPWRIGHTS ARE ALMOST DONE WITH THE REFIT ON THE TOUCH-AND-GO. WE'LL BE LOOKING FOR A GOOD SHAKEDOWN CRUISE IN A FEW DAYS.
GAVCORPS DOESN'T NEED ANYBODY SHAKEN DOWN.
WE'RE MERCENARIES. IT'S TYPICALLY OUR CLIENTS WHO GET SHAKEN DOWN.
YOU MIGHT WANT TO WORK ON THAT SALES PITCH.


WHAT'S THE JOB, AMBASSADOR?
SECURITY. WE FOUND SOMETHING INTERESTING. IT'S PROBABLY VALUABLE. WE WANT TO KEEP IT
THE SIMPLEST APPROACH IS TO SECURE YOUR PROBABLY-VALUABLE, MYSTERIOUS THING ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO.
IT'S A PLANET, CAPTAIN.
WHY CAN'T MY CLIENTS BE HAPPY WITH THE SIMPLE SOLUTIONS?


PARNASSUS DOM, IN THE POSADH DEAN ASSEMBLY HALL
Wow, there are a lot of people here.
Terrifying, isn't it?
Terrifying?
This event is huge! The number of things that can go wrong is a combinatorial function.
I don't think Petey allows combinatorials at these functions.
The snooty bartender won't do depth charges.


It's Murphy's Law of Weddings, Sergeant. "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong as close to the nuptials as possible."
The food, the music, the lighting, the clothing, the guests...
Even discounting enemy action, this place is a giant Murphy bomb, and we're at ground zero.
So why isn't anybody else scared?

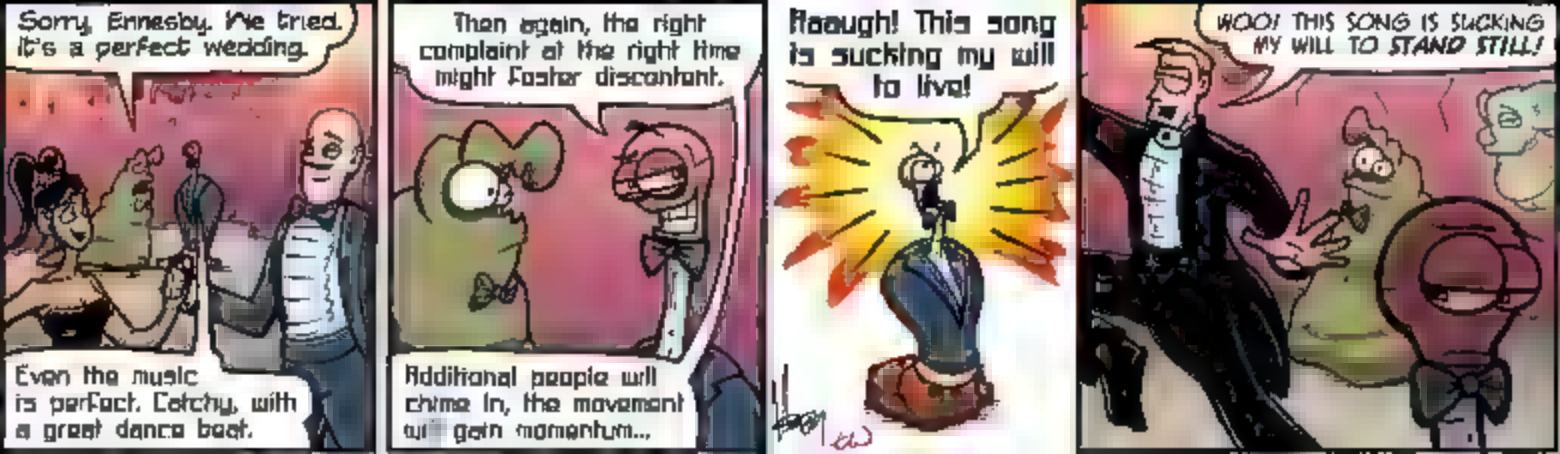

Ignorance.
Is bliss.
I'm troubleshooting on the fly. Minor problems have arisen, but they have been addressed. Nobody will notice anything went wrong.
Oh, no... We're part of a perfect wedding?
Now what's wrong?
The karmic debt we're accruing could destroy a planet
Well, we're in a flying city so that's somebody else's problem.

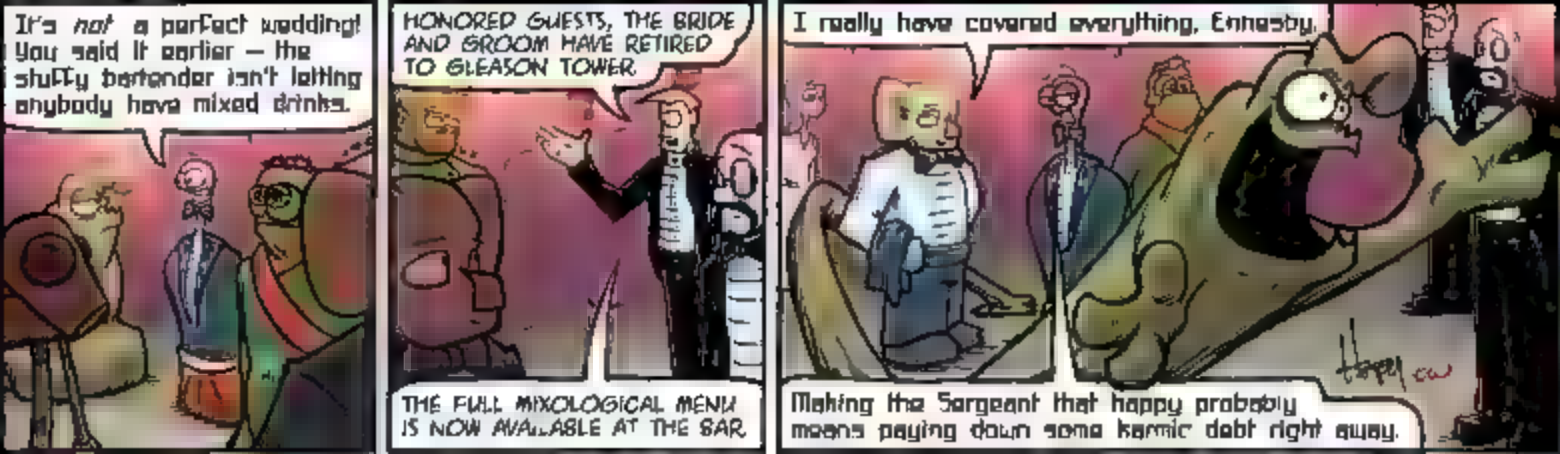

Sergeant, it's up to us to restore karmic balance.
Let it go, Ernesby.
We must sow chaos now so that disaster doesn't strike later
I'm going to speak my mind when they get to the "speak now or forever hold your peace" bit
Whatever. Just don't include me in your crazy plan.
I need you to sneak out and eat the wedding cake.
Operation Sow Chaos is a go!


ATTEMPTED WEDDING RUINATION IN PROGRESS.
Mmmm... Karmic balance tastes like sugar and plastic.


Sergeant, what do you think you're doing?
Saving a planet. Ennesby said a perfect wedding would upset the karmic balance.
I had hoped you wouldn't let him talk you into scattering discord.
Notwithstanding Hope's eternal springing, I prepared a spare cake.
THOOOM
I should have considered an ablative layer of fondant


The cakes have been taken care of. How did the 'speak now or hold your peace' part go?
They didn't do it
If I'd known they weren't going to do it I'd have just blurted something out, but no... they got to the end of the ceremony perfectly, no interruptions.
Wait... Cakes? Plural?
There were two. Petey saw me coming, but he tipped his hand too early.
I know Petey. If he made two, he made more than two.
Actually, I made eleven in case you managed to do something genuinely unpredictable.


Sorry, Ennesby. We tried. It's a perfect wedding.
Even the music is perfect. Catchy, with a great dance beat.
Then again, the right complaint at the right time might foster discontent.
Additional people will chime in, the movement will gain momentum...
Raaugh! This song is sucking my will to live!
WOO! THIS SONG IS SUCKING MY WILL TO STAND STILL!

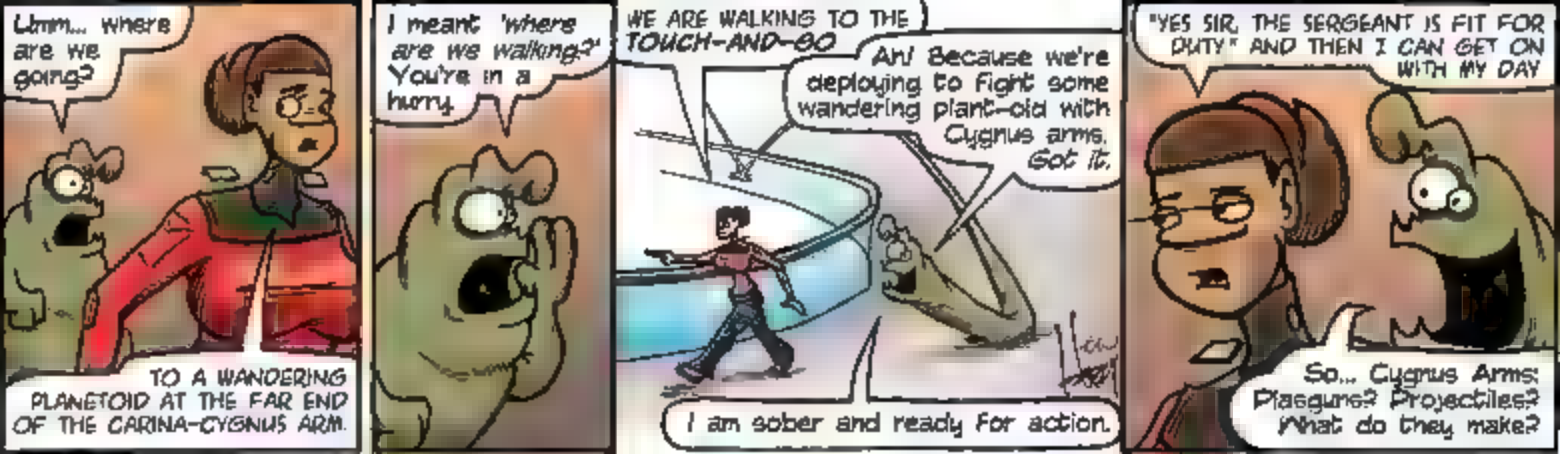

It's *not* a perfect wedding! You said it earlier — the stuffy bartender isn't letting anybody have mixed drinks.
HONORED GUESTS, THE BRIDE AND GROOM HAVE RETIRED TO GLEASON TOWER.
THE FULL MIXOLOGICAL MENU IS NOW AVAILABLE AT THE BAR.
I really have covered everything, Ennesby.
Making the Sergeant that happy probably means paying down some karmic debt right away.

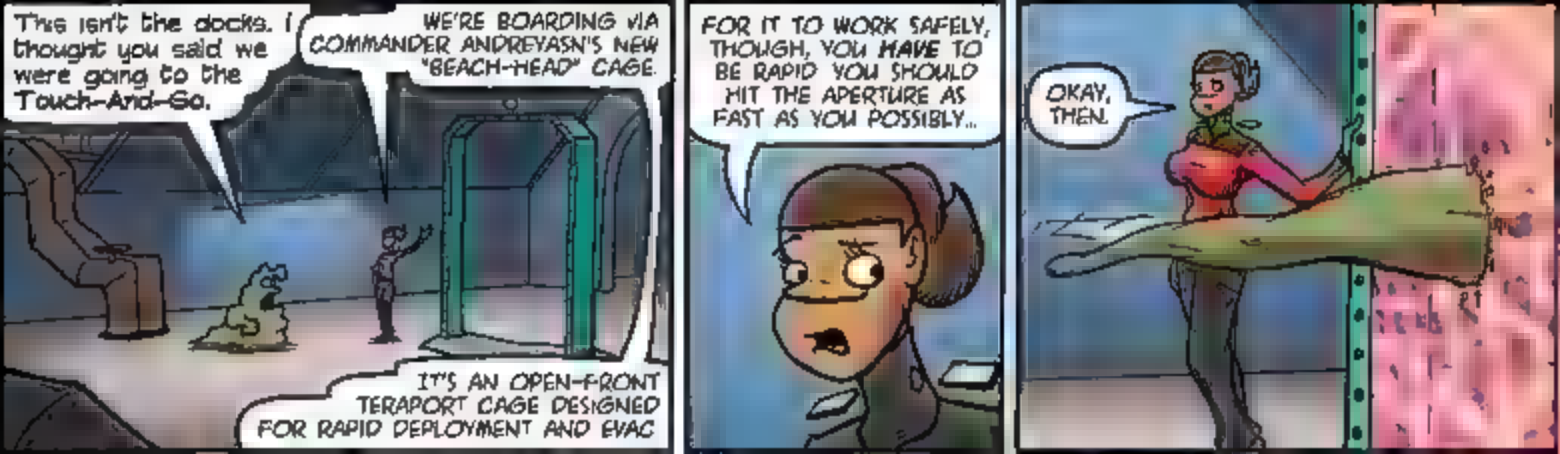


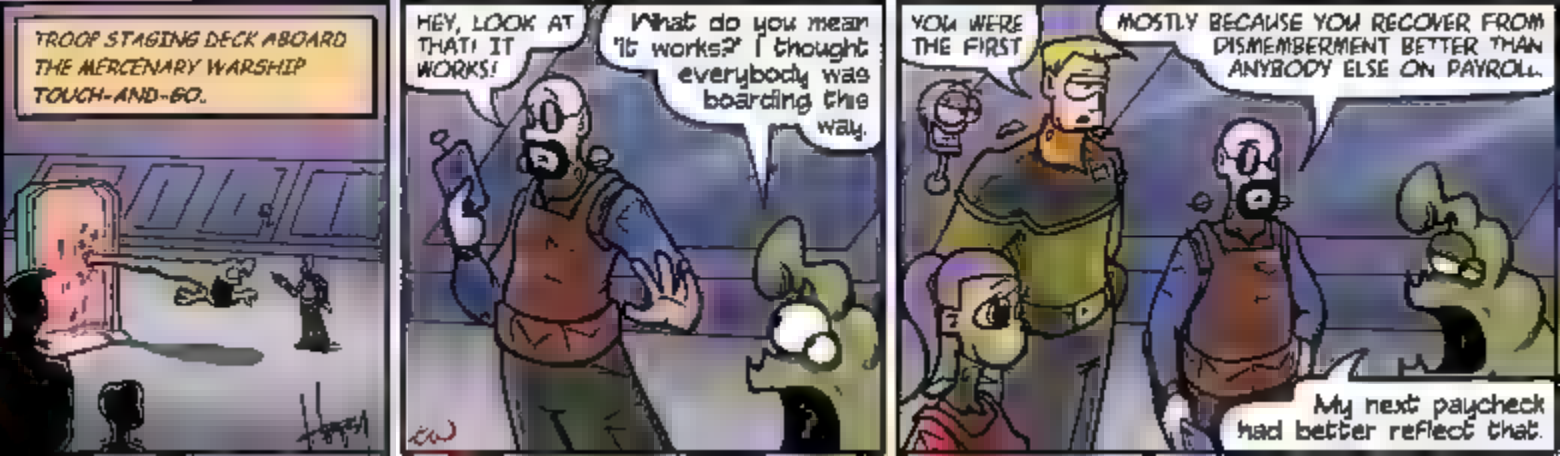

HOW IS IT THAT YOU'RE ACTUALLY INTOXICATED?
If I don't want to metabolize this stuff, you can't make me.


Aren't you supposed to be on your honeymoon or something?
WE'RE DONE IT WAS LOVELY
Kind of short, though. Is everything okay with you and the Rev?
EVERYTHING'S JUST FINE
Whatever you say.
YOU WERE OUT FOR FOUR DAYS SERGEANT
Well, that explains why it's not very warm in this tub.

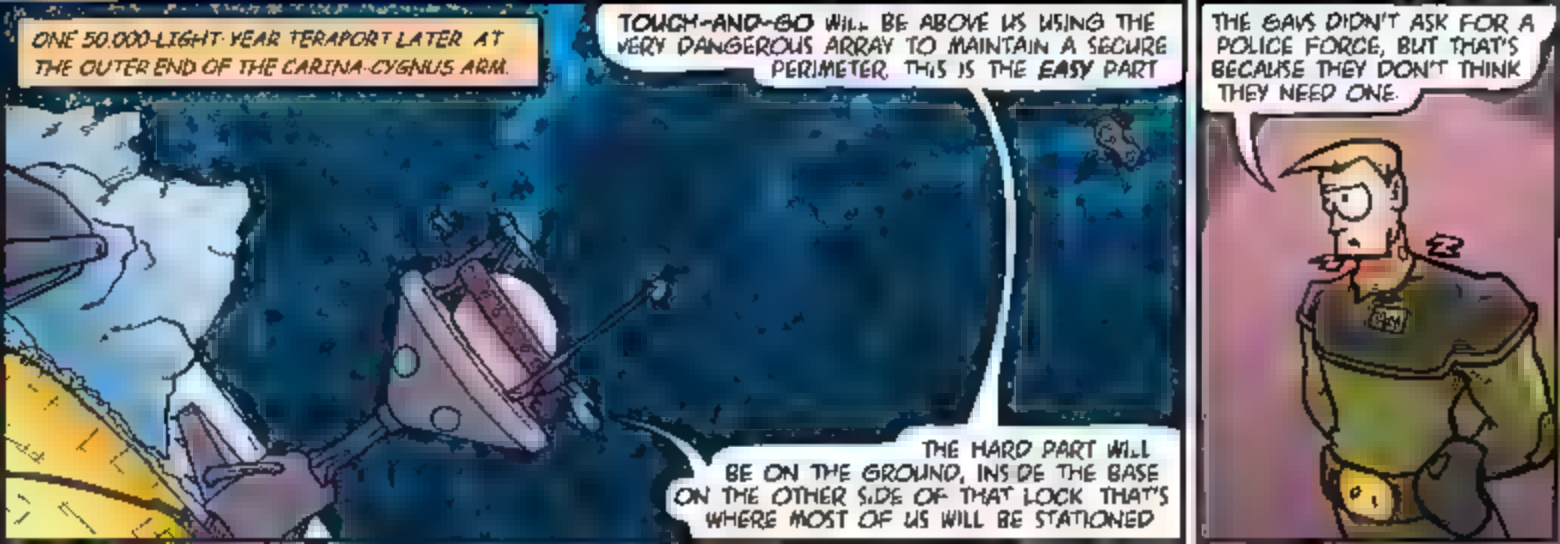

I had this horrible dream about Nick telling me he got fired for not having brain surgery.
And it wasn't fair, because Para, Aardy, and Chisulo... all the new guys... they didn't have to have the surgery at all.
Who can we really trust?
You're looking at me like that wasn't a dream, and might be the reason I was drunk for four days.
I'M NOT ANSWERING UNTIL YOU PROMISE ME YOU'RE DONE BEING DRUNK.
Done for how long?


Umm... where are we going?
TO A WANDERING PLANETOID AT THE FAR END OF THE CARINA-CYGNUS ARM.
I meant 'where are we walking?' You're in a hurry.
WE ARE WALKING TO THE TOUCH-AND-GO
Ah! Because we're deploying to fight some wandering plant-oid with Cygnus arms. Got it.
I am sober and ready for action.
"YES SIR, THE SERGEANT IS FIT FOR DUTY" AND THEN I CAN GET ON WITH MY DAY
So... Cygnus Arms: Plasguns? Projectiles? What do they make?


This isn't the docks. I thought you said we were going to the Touch-And-Go.
WE'RE BOARDING VIA COMMANDER ANDREYASN'S NEW "BEACH-HEAD" CAGE.
IT'S AN OPEN-FRONT TERAPORT CAGE DESIGNED FOR RAPID DEPLOYMENT AND EVAC
FOR IT TO WORK SAFELY, THOUGH, YOU HAVE TO BE RAPID YOU SHOULD HIT THE APERTURE AS FAST AS YOU POSSIBLY...
OKAY, THEN.

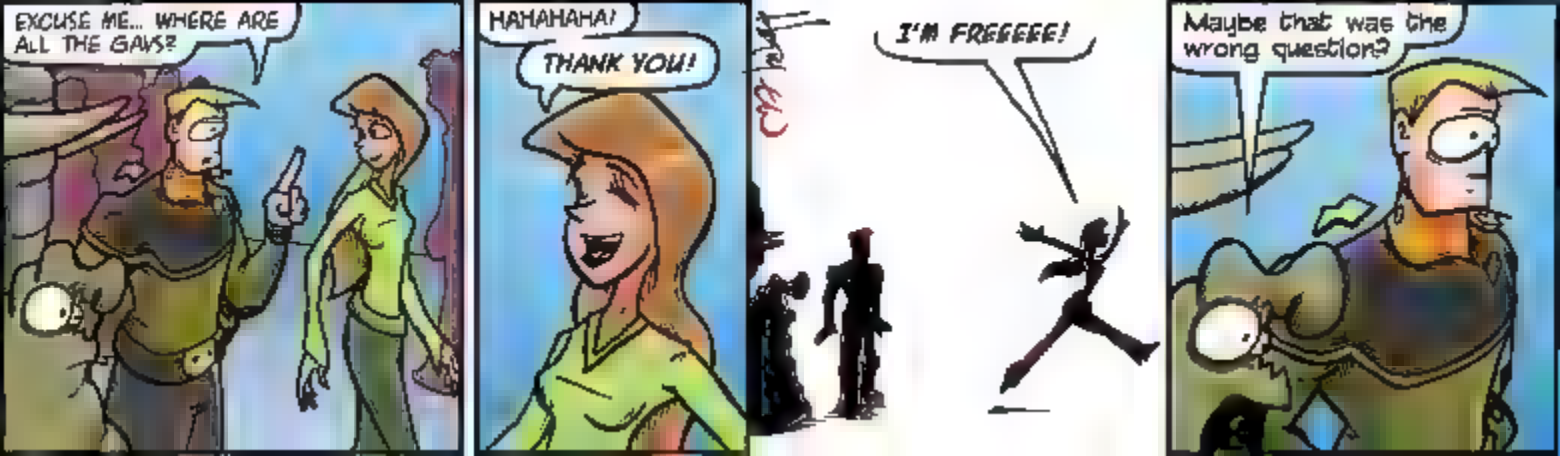

TROOP STAGING DECK ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO.
HEY, LOOK AT THAT! IT WORKS!
What do you mean "it works?" I thought everybody was boarding this way.
YOU WERE THE FIRST
MOSTLY BECAUSE YOU RECOVER FROM DISMEMBERMENT BETTER THAN ANYBODY ELSE ON PAYROLL.
My next paycheck had better reflect that.


DEPARTING PARNASSUS DOM.
THE BEACH-HEAD CAGE WORKS PERFECTLY WE HAVE A NEW SECRET WEAPON.
HOW LONG DO YOU THINK IT'LL REMAIN SECRET?
U.N.S INT-AFF-INT DEEP BENEATH THE EUROPAN ICE
THE TOUGHS JUST LEFT PETEY'S INFOSPHERE.
DATA-DUMP FROM OUR AGENT INDICATES THEY'VE GOT SOME NEW DEPLOYMENT TECHNOLOGY
ELAPSED TIME: 45.62 SECONDS.

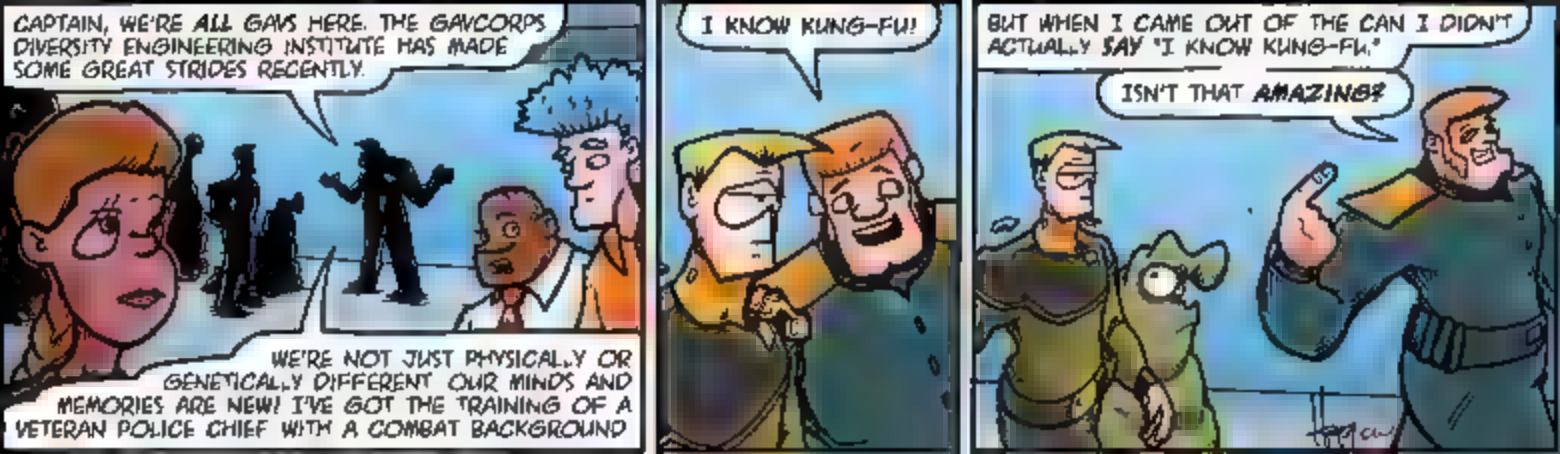

ONE 50,000-LIGHT-YEAR TERAPORT LATER AT THE OUTER END OF THE CARINA-CYGNUS ARM.
TOUCH-AND-GO WILL BE ABOVE US USING THE VERY DANGEROUS ARRAY TO MAINTAIN A SECURE PERIMETER. THIS IS THE EASY PART
THE HARD PART WILL BE ON THE GROUND, INSIDE THE BASE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THAT LOCK THAT'S WHERE MOST OF US WILL BE STATIONED
THE GAVS DIDN'T ASK FOR A POLICE FORCE, BUT THAT'S BECAUSE THEY DON'T THINK THEY NEED ONE.
ZZ


THEY'RE ALL ALIKE! WHY WOULD ANY OF THEM BETRAY THE OTHERS, OR STEAL, OR PICK A FIGHT?
AND THAT'S WHAT MAKES YOUR JOB SO DIFFICULT. IF THERE IS SOME SORT OF A PROBLEM DOWN HERE THE PERPETRATOR IS GOING TO LOOK EXACTLY LIKE EVERYONE ELSE.
WATCH, LISTEN, AND DON'T LET YOURSELF GET FREAKED OUT BY THE SEA OF IDENTICAL FACES.
LET'S GO.

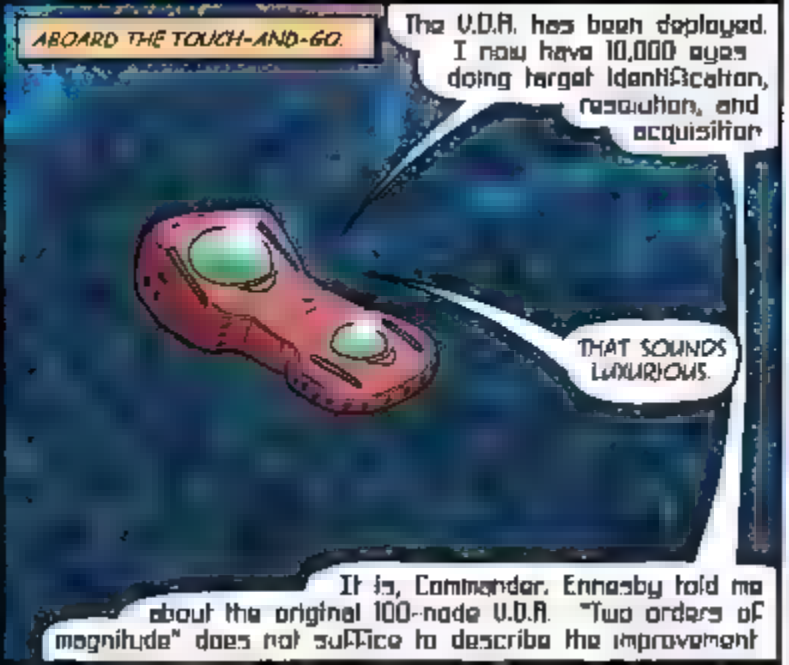

YEAH, THEY ALL LOOK ALIKE TO ME, BUT I'VE GOT A LITTLE BIT OF A RACIST STREAK.

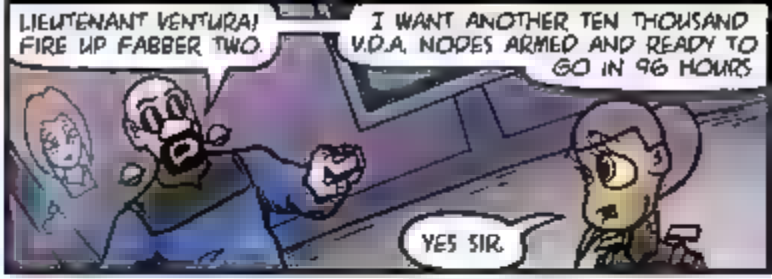

EXCUSE ME... WHERE ARE ALL THE GAYS?
HAHAHAHA!
THANK YOU!
I'M FREEEEE!
Maybe that was the wrong question?

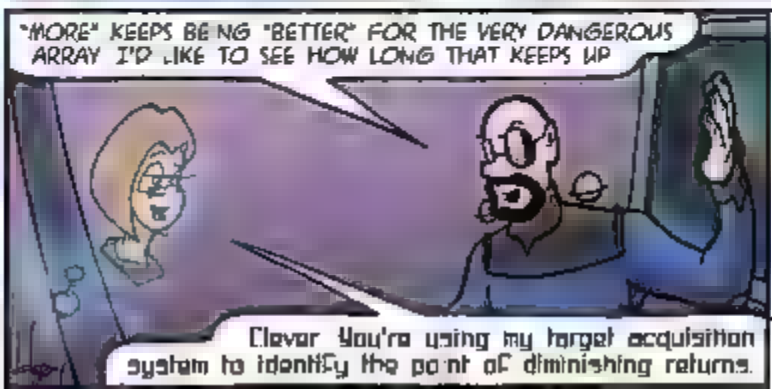

CAPTAIN TAGON, I'M SECURITY CHIEF AUGUSTUS CHEVRE. I'M SORRY I WASN'T HERE TO GREET YOU IMMEDIATELY
CHIEF CHEVRE,
PLEASE, CALL ME GUS.
GUS, THEN... WHERE ARE ALL THE GALS?
AH, CAPTAIN. YOU CANNOT POSSIBLY UNDERSTAND HOW HAPPY I AM TO HEAR YOU ASK THAT QUESTION.
ASA DIDN'T PUT YOU UP TO THIS, DID SHE? I'M SURE THE WOMAN SNUCK A PSYCH DOCTORATE INTO ONE OF HER PASSES THROUGH THE CAN.
YOU KNOW WHAT WOULD MAKE ME HAPPY? AN ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION.
MAN! I COULD KISS YOU RIGHT NOW!

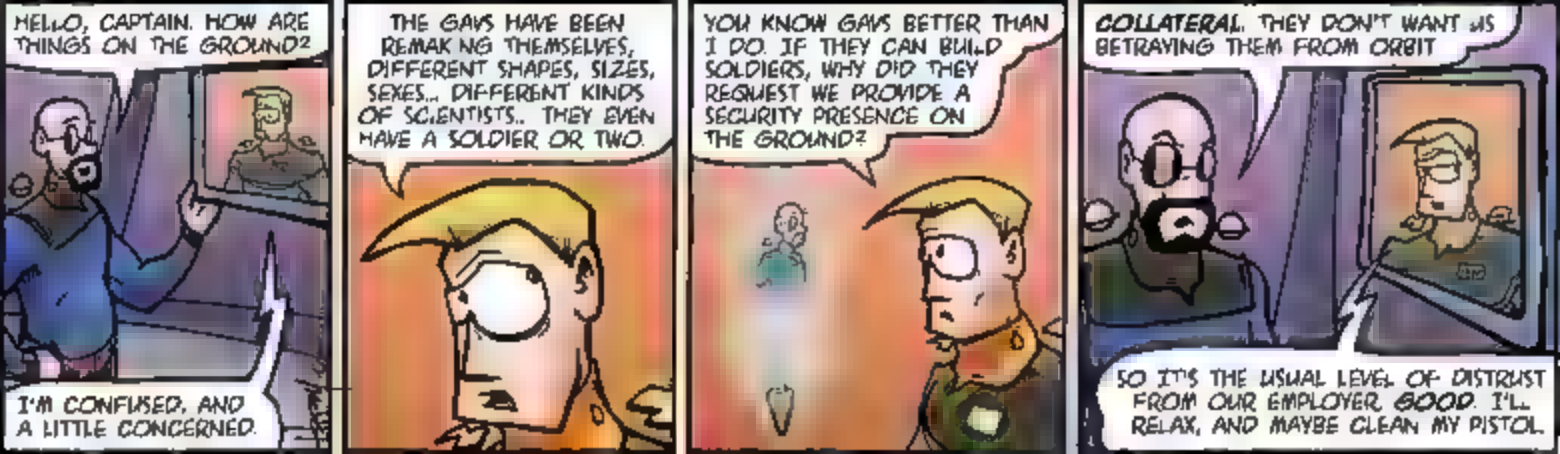

CAPTAIN, WE'RE ALL GAVS HERE. THE GAVCORPS DIVERSITY ENGINEERING INSTITUTE HAS MADE SOME GREAT STRIDES RECENTLY.
WE'RE NOT JUST PHYSICALLY OR GENETICALLY DIFFERENT. OUR MINDS AND MEMORIES ARE NEW! I'VE GOT THE TRAINING OF A VETERAN POLICE CHIEF WITH A COMBAT BACKGROUND
I KNOW KUNG-FU!
BUT WHEN I CAME OUT OF THE CAN I DIDN'T ACTUALLY SAY "I KNOW KUNG-FU."
ISN'T THAT AMAZING?

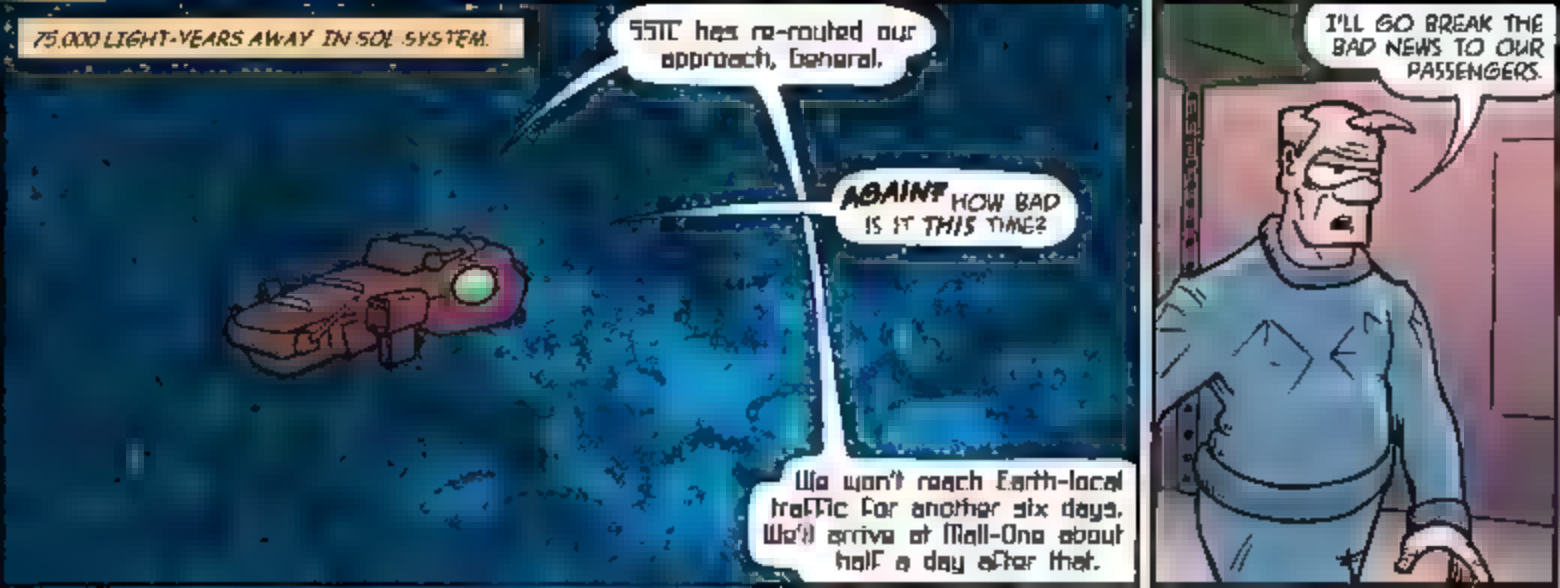

WE CALL THIS WORLD OISRI. IT MEANS "OYSTER" IN AN ANCIENT EARTH LANGUAGE
INTERESTING. WHAT MAKES YOU THINK THERE'S A PEARL IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS ONE?
OISRI IS THE SIZE OF EARTH'S MOON, BUT IT HAS ROUGHLY 1'2 TIMES THE MASS OF EARTH.
DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT THAT MEANS?
"SECURITY"
Bath tub!
IT MEANS I HOPE THERE ISN'T A BLACK HOLE DOWN THERE, BECAUSE YOUR SCIENTISTS WILL PROBABLY DIG IT UP AND THEN IT WILL EAT US.

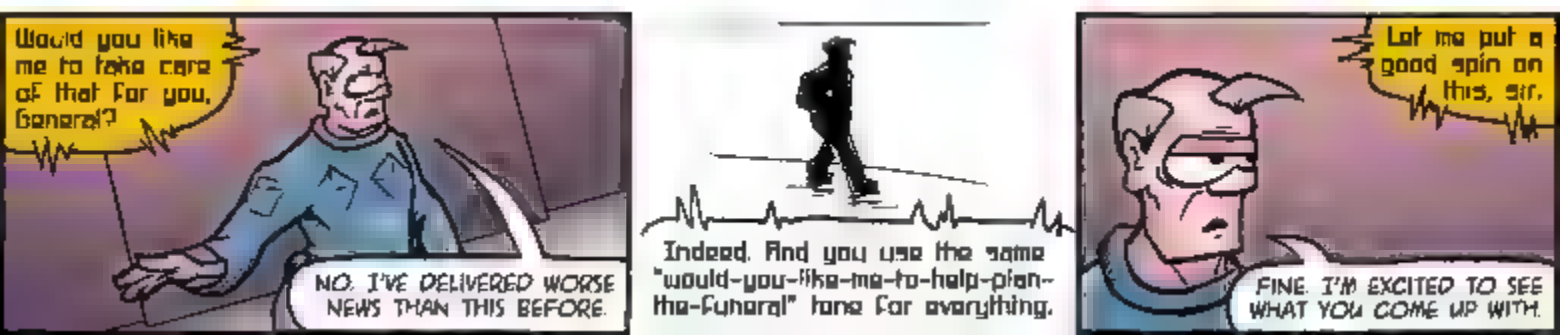

ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO.
The V.D.A. has been deployed. I now have 10,000 eyes doing target identification, resolution, and acquisition
THAT SOUNDS LUXURIOUS.
It is, Commander. Ennesby told me about the original 100-node V.D.A. "Two orders of magnitude" does not suffice to describe the improvement

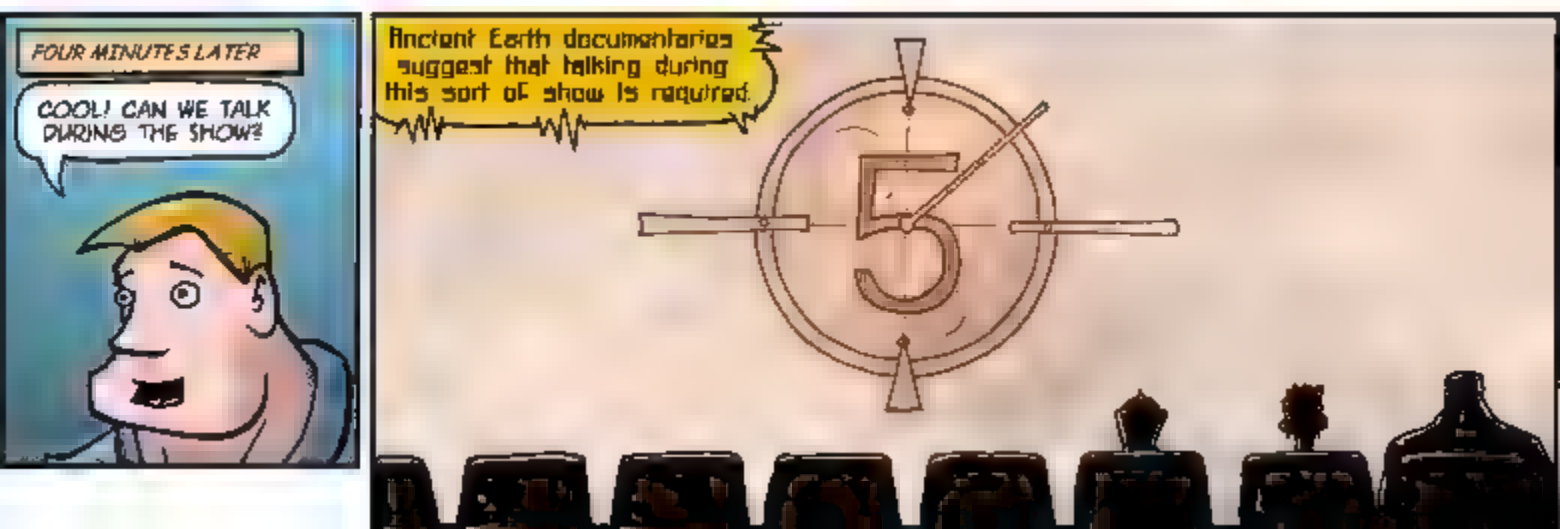

LIEUTENANT VENTURA! FIRE UP FABBER TWO.
I WANT ANOTHER TEN THOUSAND V.D.A. NODES ARMED AND READY TO GO IN 96 HOURS
YES SIR.

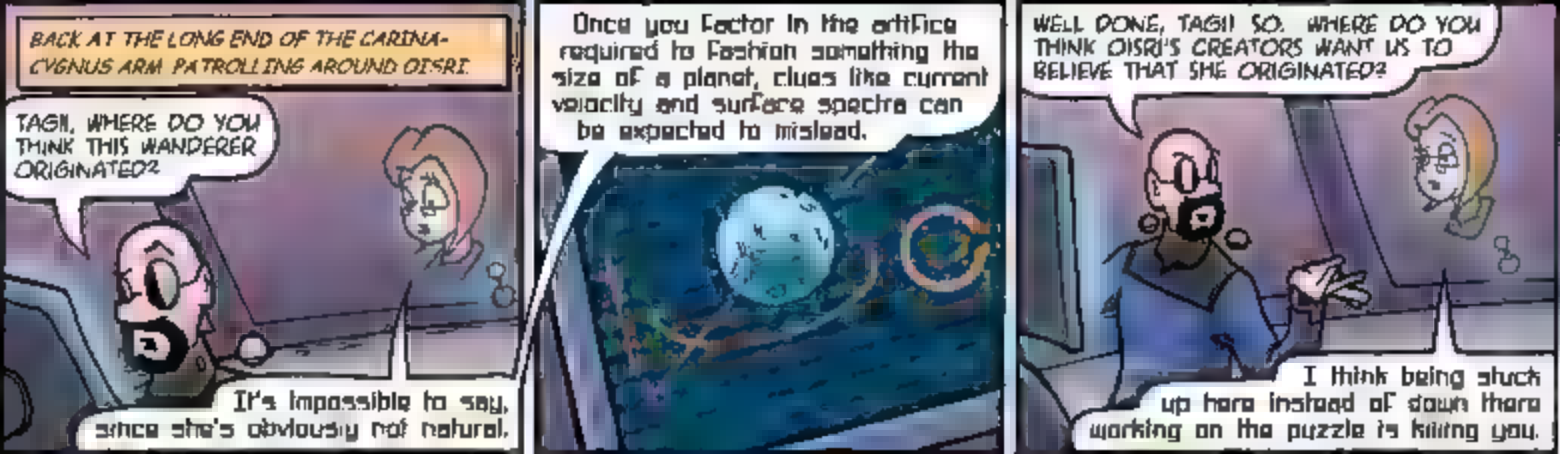

"MORE" KEEPS BEING "BETTER" FOR THE VERY DANGEROUS ARRAY I'D LIKE TO SEE HOW LONG THAT KEEPS UP
Clever. You're using my target acquisition system to identify the point of diminishing returns.

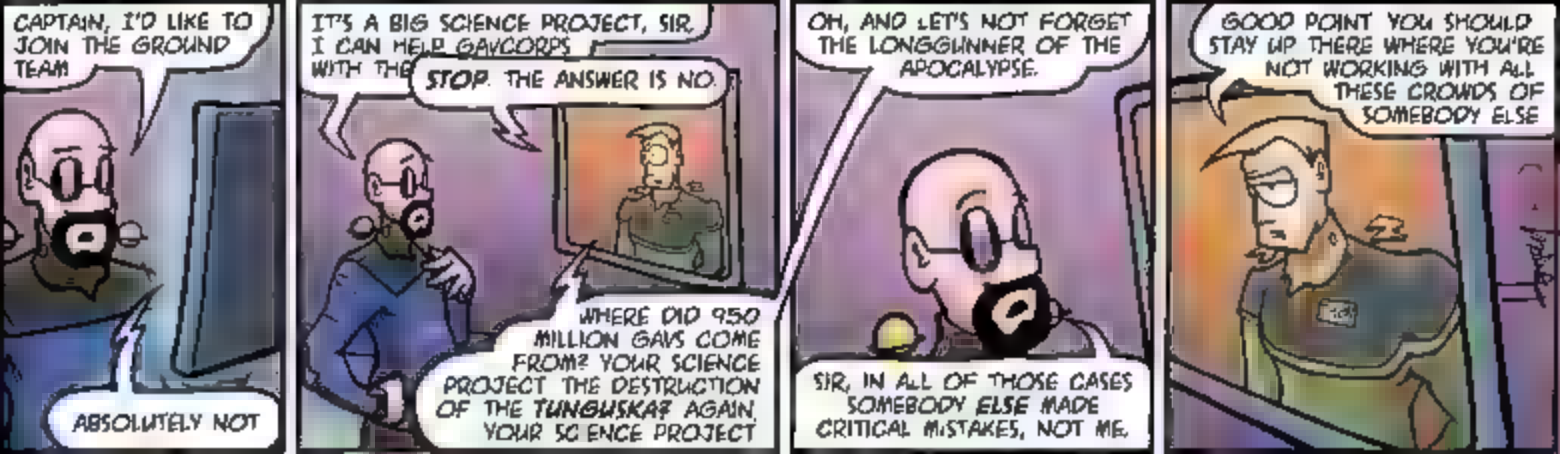

HELLO, CAPTAIN. HOW ARE THINGS ON THE GROUND?
I'M CONFUSED, AND A LITTLE CONCERNED.
THE GAVS HAVE BEEN REMAKING THEMSELVES, DIFFERENT SHAPES, SIZES, SEXES... DIFFERENT KINDS OF SCIENTISTS.. THEY EVEN HAVE A SOLDIER OR TWO.
YOU KNOW GAVS BETTER THAN I DO. IF THEY CAN BUILD SOLDIERS, WHY DID THEY REQUEST WE PROVIDE A SECURITY PRESENCE ON THE GROUND?
COLLATERAL. THEY DON'T WANT US BETRAYING THEM FROM ORBIT
SO IT'S THE USUAL LEVEL OF DISTRUST FROM OUR EMPLOYER. GOOD. I'LL RELAX, AND MAYBE CLEAN MY PISTOL.

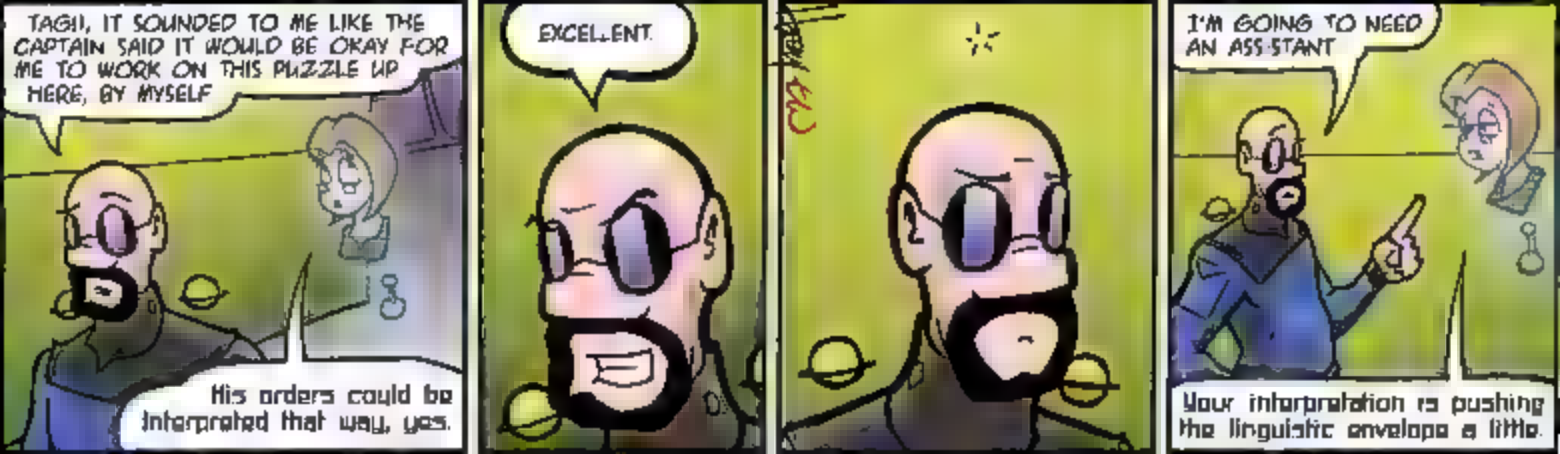

75,000 LIGHT-YEARS AWAY IN SOL SYSTEM.
SSTC has re-routed our approach, General.
AGAIN? HOW BAD IS IT THIS TIME?
We won't reach Earth-local traffic for another six days. We'll arrive at Mall-Ono about half a day after that.
I'LL GO BREAK THE BAD NEWS TO OUR PASSENGERS.

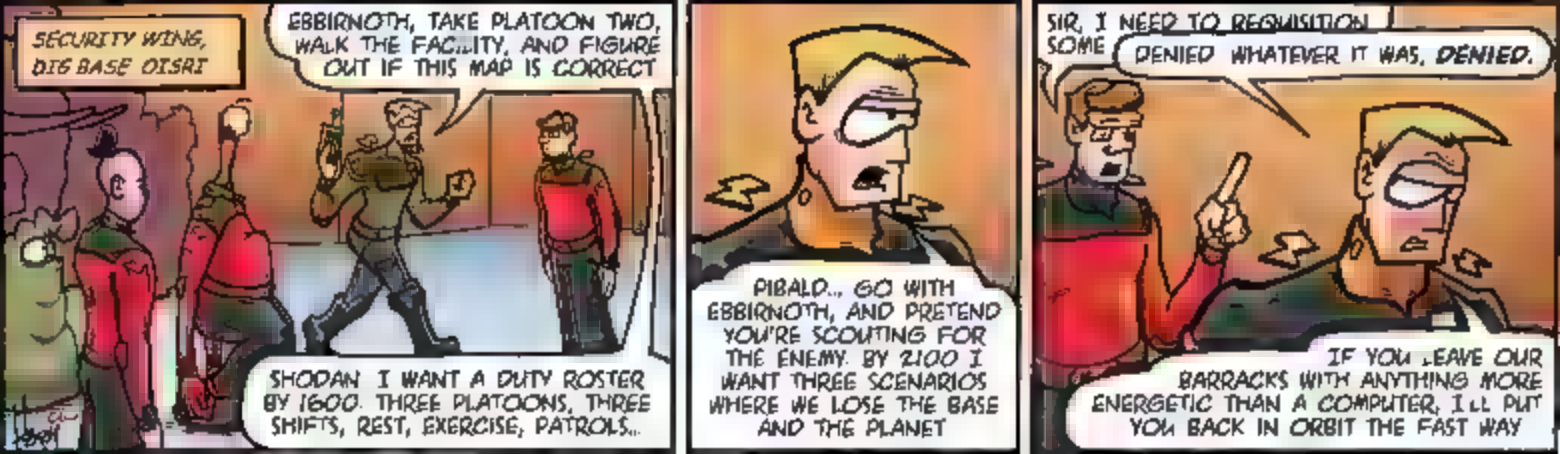

Would you like me to take care of that for you, General?
NO. I'VE DELIVERED WORSE NEWS THAN THIS BEFORE.
Indeed. And you use the same "would-you-like-me-to-help-plan-the-funeral" tone for everything.
Let me put a good spin on this, sir.
FINE. I'M EXCITED TO SEE WHAT YOU COME UP WITH.

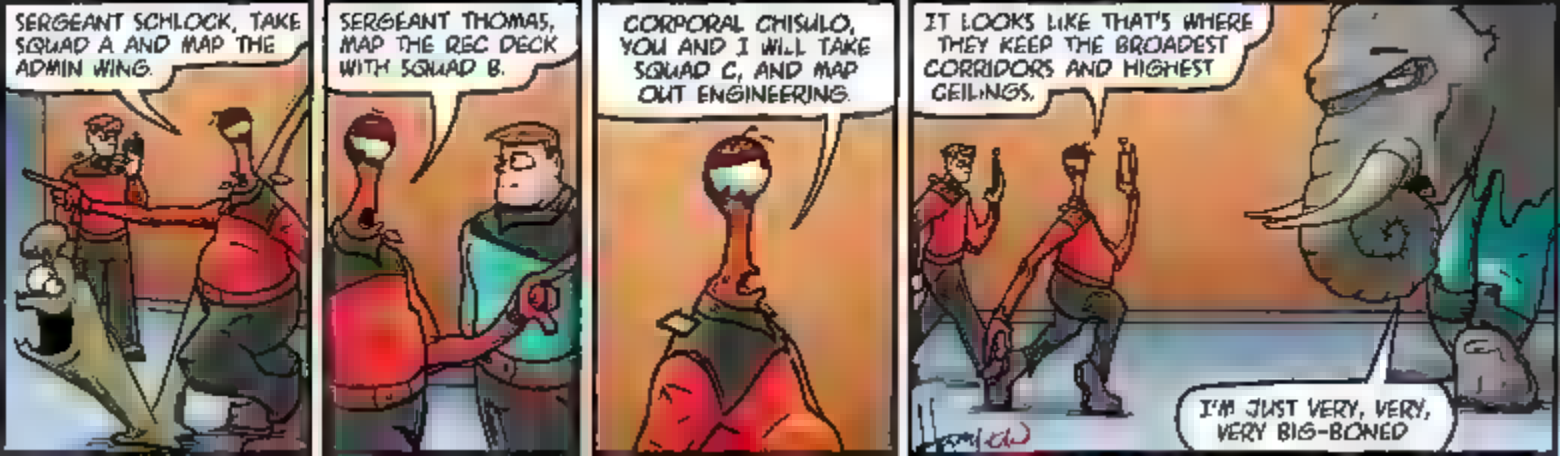

FOUR MINUTES LATER
COOL! CAN WE TALK DURING THE SHOW?
Ancient Earth documentaries suggest that talking during this sort of show is required.
5

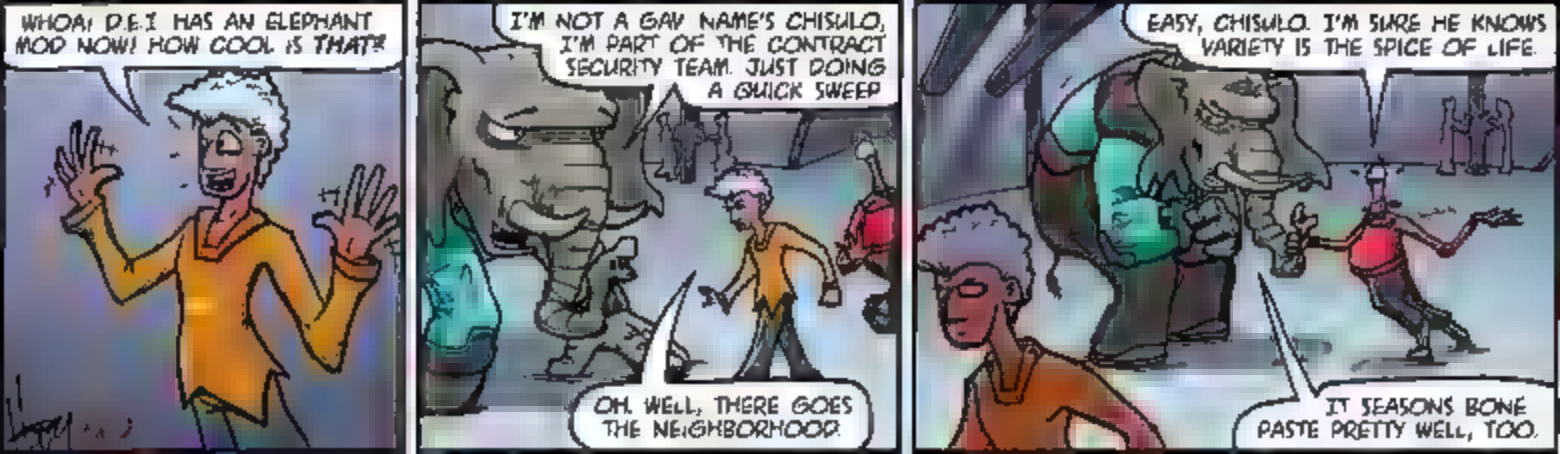

BACK AT THE LONG END OF THE CARINA-CYGNUS ARM PATROLLING AROUND OISRI.
TAGH, WHERE DO YOU THINK THIS WANDERER ORIGINATED?
It's impossible to say, since she's obviously not natural.
Once you factor in the artifice required to fashion something the size of a planet, clues like current velocity and surface spectra can be expected to mislead.
WELL DONE, TAGH! SO. WHERE DO YOU THINK OISRI'S CREATORS WANT US TO BELIEVE THAT SHE ORIGINATED?
I think being stuck up here instead of down there working on the puzzle is killing you.


CAPTAIN, I'D LIKE TO JOIN THE GROUND TEAM
ABSOLUTELY NOT
IT'S A BIG SCIENCE PROJECT, SIR. I CAN HELP GAVCORPS WITH THE
STOP. THE ANSWER IS NO.
WHERE DID 950 MILLION GAVS COME FROM? YOUR SCIENCE PROJECT. THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TUNGUSKA? AGAIN. YOUR SCIENCE PROJECT
OH, AND LET'S NOT FORGET THE LONGGUNNER OF THE APOCALYPSE.
SIR, IN ALL OF THOSE CASES SOMEBODY ELSE MADE CRITICAL MISTAKES, NOT ME.
GOOD POINT. YOU SHOULD STAY UP THERE WHERE YOU'RE NOT WORKING WITH ALL THESE CROWDS OF SOMEBODY ELSE

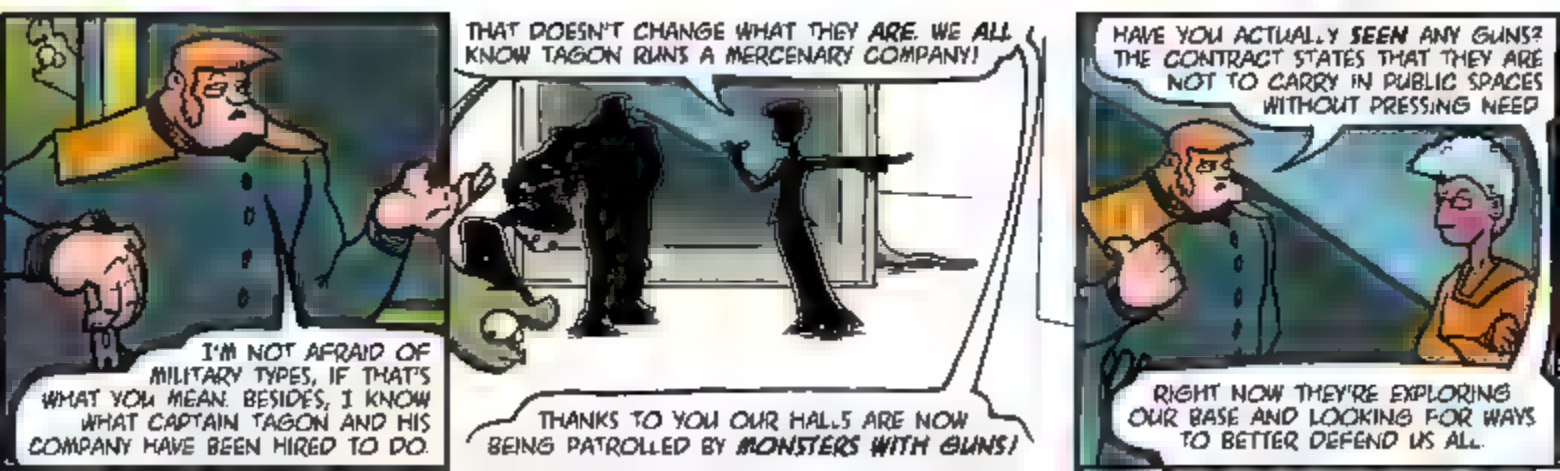

TAGH, IT SOUNDED TO ME LIKE THE CAPTAIN SAID IT WOULD BE OKAY FOR ME TO WORK ON THIS PUZZLE UP HERE, BY MYSELF
His orders could be interpreted that way, yes.
EXCELLENT.
I'M GOING TO NEED AN ASS-STANT
Your interpretation is pushing the linguistic envelope a little.


SECURITY WING, DIG BASE OISRI
EBBIRNOTH, TAKE PLATOON TWO, WALK THE FACILITY, AND FIGURE OUT IF THIS MAP IS CORRECT
SHODAN I WANT A DUTY ROSTER BY 1600. THREE PLATOONS, THREE SHIFTS, REST, EXERCISE, PATROLS..
PIBALD.., GO WITH EBBIRNOTH, AND PRETEND YOU'RE SCOUTING FOR THE ENEMY. BY 2100 I WANT THREE SCENARIOS WHERE WE LOSE THE BASE AND THE PLANET
SIR, I NEED TO REQUISITION SOME
DENIED WHATEVER IT WAS, DENIED.
IF YOU LEAVE OUR BARRACKS WITH ANYTHING MORE ENERGETIC THAN A COMPUTER, I'LL PUT YOU BACK IN ORBIT THE FAST WAY

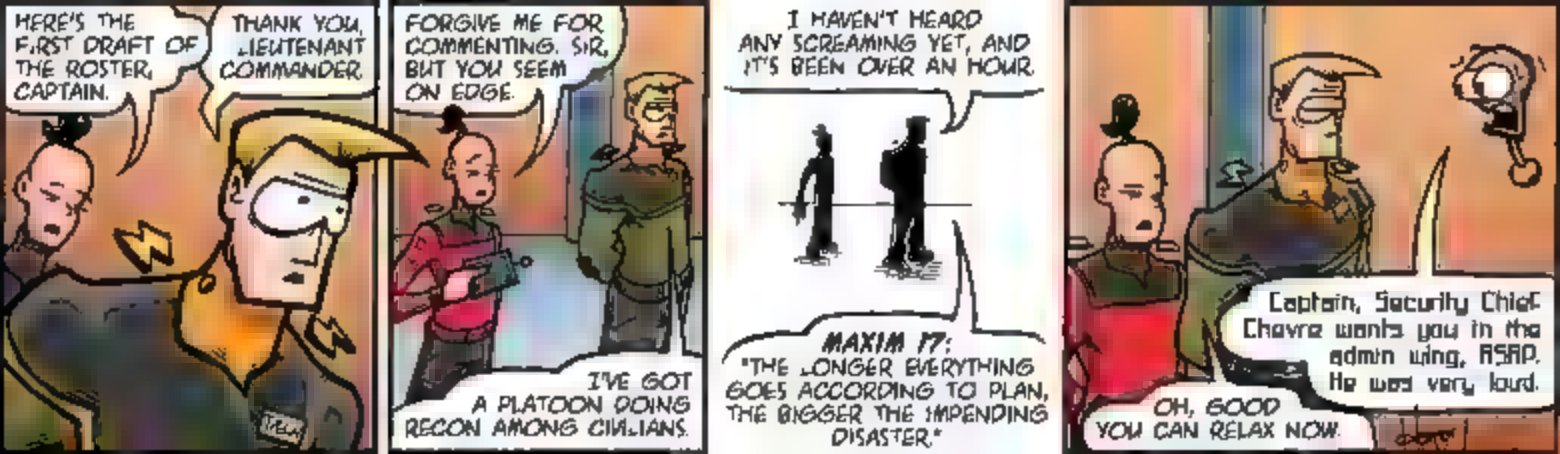

SERGEANT SCHLOCK, TAKE SQUAD A AND MAP THE ADMIN WING.
SERGEANT THOMAS, MAP THE REC DECK WITH SQUAD B.
CORPORAL CHISULO, YOU AND I WILL TAKE SQUAD C, AND MAP OUT ENGINEERING.
IT LOOKS LIKE THAT'S WHERE THEY KEEP THE BROADEST CORRIDORS AND HIGHEST CEILINGS.
I'M JUST VERY, VERY, VERY BIG-BONED


WHOA! D.E.I. HAS AN ELEPHANT MOD NOW! HOW COOL IS THAT?!
I'M NOT A GAY. NAME'S CHISULO, I'M PART OF THE CONTRACT SECURITY TEAM. JUST DOING A QUICK SWEEP
OH. WELL, THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD.
EASY, CHISULO. I'M SURE HE KNOWS VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF LIFE.
IT SEASONS BONE PASTE PRETTY WELL, TOO.


OISRI DIG BASE ADMIN WING.
MERCENARIES! NOBODY SAID THERE'D BE MERCENARIES HERE!
KISH, THEY ARE SECURITY CONTRACTORS.
YOU'RE GOING WITH THAT LINE? SERIOUSLY GUS, DID YOUR PASS THROUGH THE CAN TURN YOU INTO A TOTAL TOOL?


I'M NOT AFRAID OF MILITARY TYPES, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU MEAN. BESIDES, I KNOW WHAT CAPTAIN TAGON AND HIS COMPANY HAVE BEEN HIRED TO DO.
THAT DOESN'T CHANGE WHAT THEY ARE. WE ALL KNOW TAGON RUNS A MERCENARY COMPANY!
THANKS TO YOU OUR HALLS ARE NOW BEING PATROLLED BY MONSTERS WITH GUNS!
HAVE YOU ACTUALLY SEEN ANY GUNS? THE CONTRACT STATES THAT THEY ARE NOT TO CARRY IN PUBLIC SPACES WITHOUT PRESSING NEED
RIGHT NOW THEY'RE EXPLORING OUR BASE AND LOOKING FOR WAYS TO BETTER DEFEND US ALL.

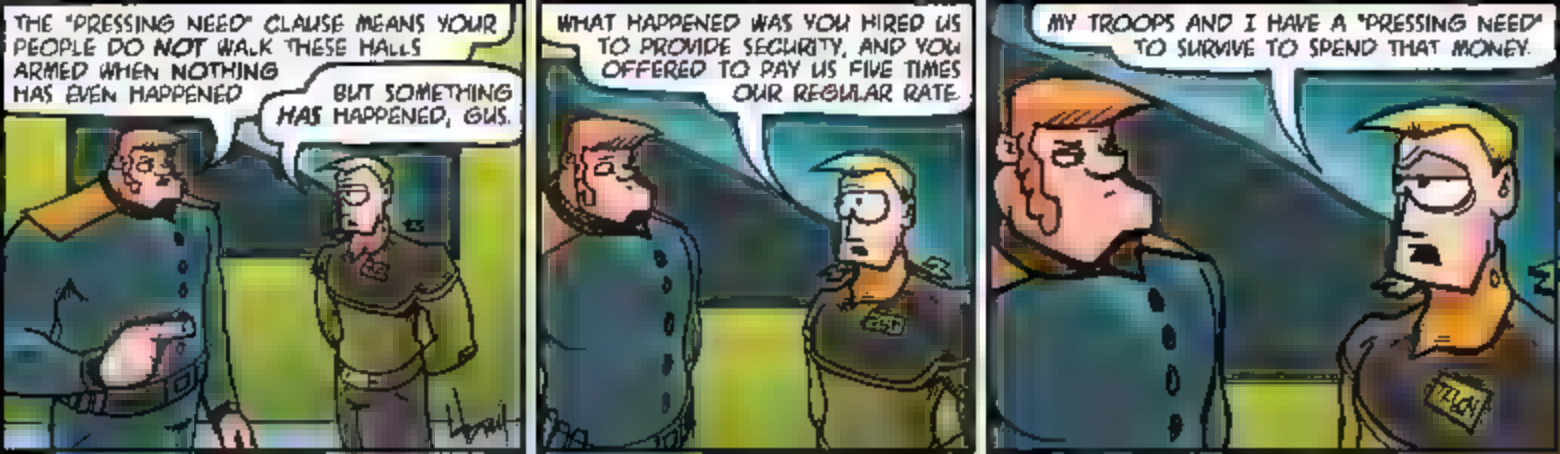

LIKE SERGEANT SCHLOCK OVER THERE.
HE'S A CARBOSILICATE AMORPH WITH UNIQUE SENSORY ABILITIES, WHOSE UNPARALLELED FLEXIBILITY LETS HIM EXPLORE ANGLES OF ATTACK WE MIGHT NEVER HAVE OTHERWISE CONSIDERED
Kish is right. I'm a monster with a gun.
I'D BETTER CHECK THAT "PRESSING NEED" CLAUSE.


HERE'S THE FIRST DRAFT OF THE ROSTER, CAPTAIN.
THANK YOU, LIEUTENANT COMMANDER.
FORGIVE ME FOR COMMENTING, SIR, BUT YOU SEEM ON EDGE.
I'VE GOT A PLATOON DOING RECON AMONG CIVILIANS.
I HAVEN'T HEARD ANY SCREAMING YET, AND IT'S BEEN OVER AN HOUR.
MAXIM 17: "THE LONGER EVERYTHING GOES ACCORDING TO PLAN, THE BIGGER THE IMPENDING DISASTER."
Captain, Security Chief Chevre wants you in the admin wing, ASAP. He was very loud.
OH, GOOD YOU CAN RELAX NOW.

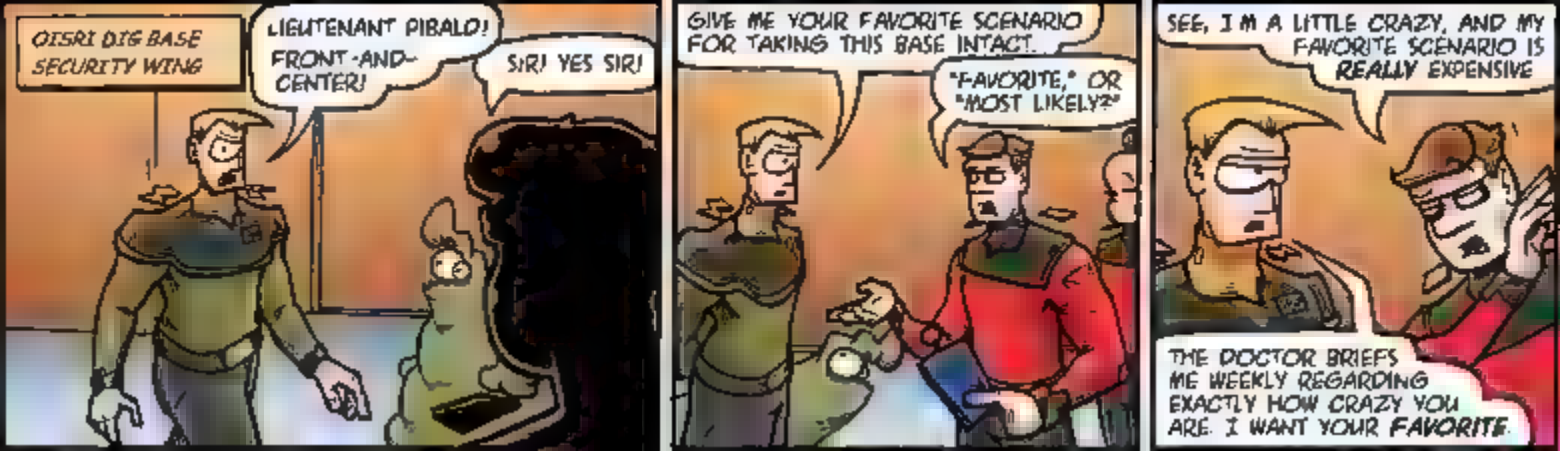

CHIEF, WHAT SEEMS TO BE THE ...
OH.
SERGEANT SCHLOCK HERE SEEMS TO BE LITTLE MORE THAN AN AMBULATORY WEAPON DEPOT
Thank you.

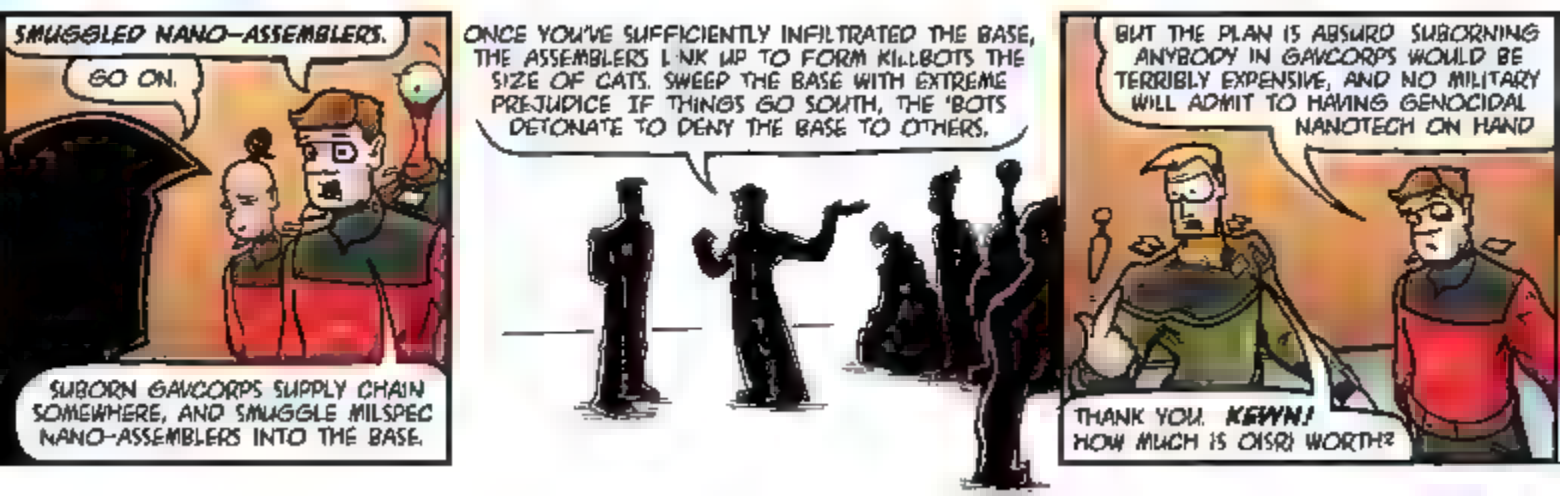

CHIEF, WITH YOUR PERMISSION, I'LL HAVE THE SERGEANT TRANSPORT ALL OF THIS MATERIEL BACK TO OUR BARRACKS.
YES, PLEASE
SERGEANT, PUT IT ALL BACK INTO YOUR MOUTH AND GO.
Yessir
NOW, WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO DISCUSS?
THAT HORRIBLE MAW...

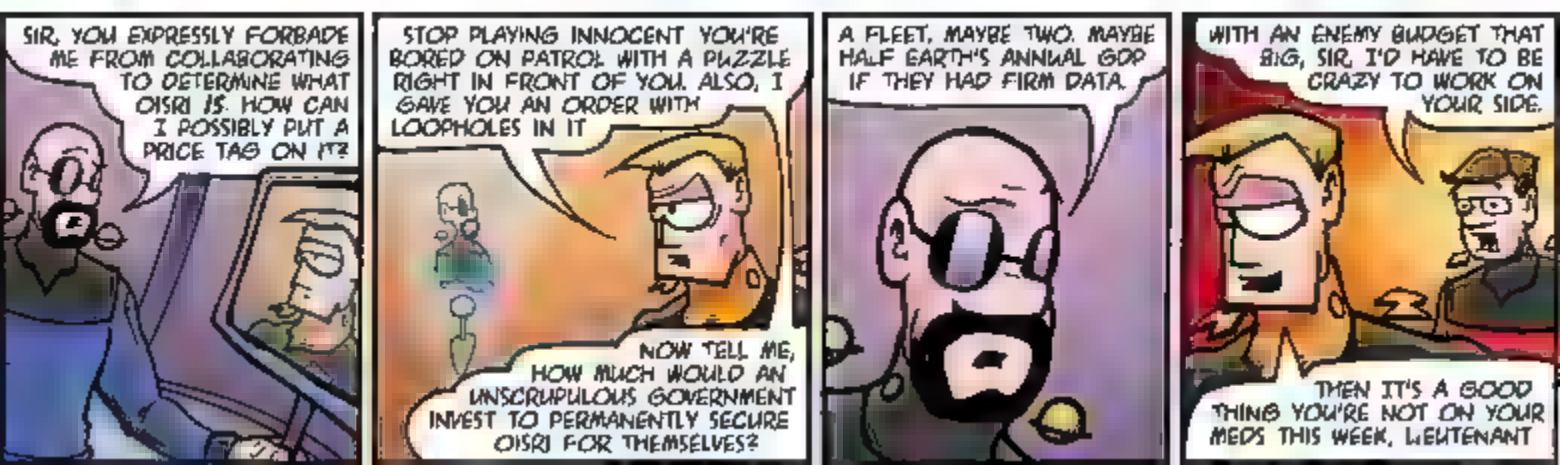

CAPTAIN TAGON JUST SCRAMBLED US ALL BACK INTO THE BARRACKS.
SO... WHAT DID YOU DO?
Our employer was having an argument about whether we were carrying guns.
He thought we weren't. Silly! I mean, what's he paying us for?
IF I HAD TO GUESS, I'D SAY HE IS NOT PAYING US TO SETTLE ARGUMENTS BY DRAWING OUR WEAPONS
Really? That sounds like what we're best at.


THE "PRESSING NEED" CLAUSE MEANS YOUR PEOPLE DO NOT WALK THESE HALLS ARMED WHEN NOTHING HAS EVEN HAPPENED
BUT SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED, GUS.
WHAT HAPPENED WAS YOU HIRED US TO PROVIDE SECURITY, AND YOU OFFERED TO PAY US FIVE TIMES OUR REGULAR RATE.
MY TROOPS AND I HAVE A "PRESSING NEED" TO SURVIVE TO SPEND THAT MONEY.

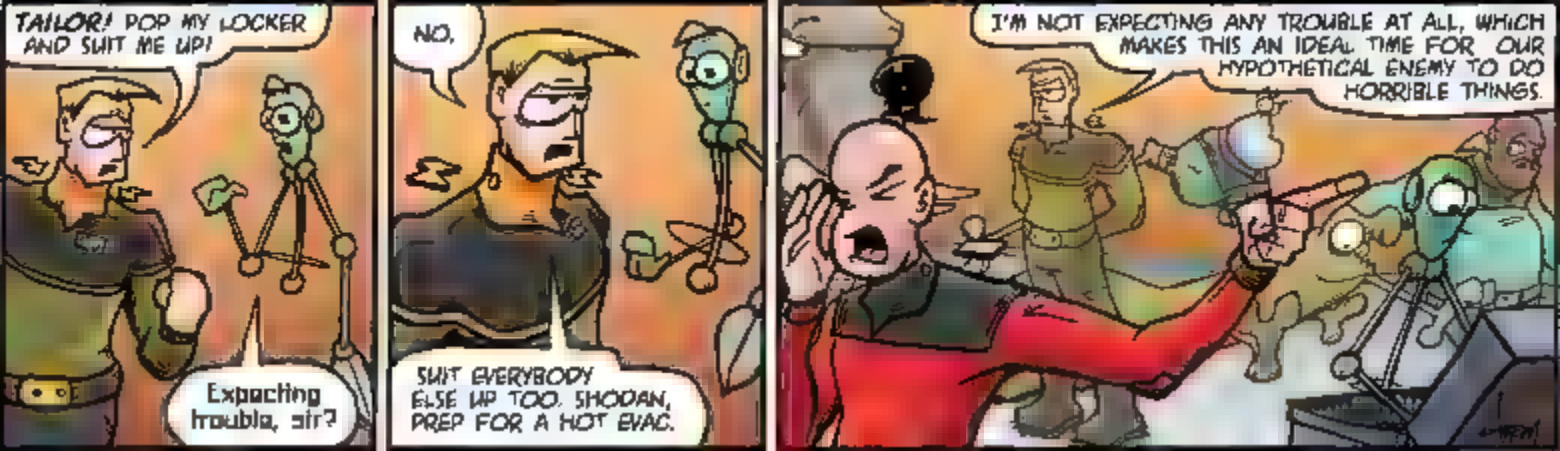

CAPTAIN, OUR INTENT WAS THAT YOUR TROOPS PROVIDE AN ON-THE-GROUND DETERRENT
IF A HOSTILE POWER DESIRES TO TAKE THIS BASE INTACT, YOUR TROOPS' PRESENCE RAISES THE COST OF ANY SUCH OPERATION, HOPEFULLY PUSHING IT ALL THE WAY INTO THE RED
YOU DON'T NEED TO ACTUALLY CARRY YOUR WEAPONS AROUND THE FACILITY TO DELIVER THAT
THAT'S A PRETTY SOLID STRATEGY. THANK YOU FOR EXPLAINING IT TO ME.
OH, GOOD I WAS WORRIED FOR A MOMENT THERE THA
WE QUIT


OISRI DIG BASE SECURITY WING
LIEUTENANT PIBALD! FRONT-AND-CENTER!
SIR! YES SIR!
GIVE ME YOUR FAVORITE SCENARIO FOR TAKING THIS BASE INTACT.
"FAVORITE," OR "MOST LIKELY?"
SEE, I'M A LITTLE CRAZY, AND MY FAVORITE SCENARIO IS REALLY EXPENSIVE
THE DOCTOR BRIEFS ME WEEKLY REGARDING EXACTLY HOW CRAZY YOU ARE. I WANT YOUR FAVORITE.


SMUGGLED NANO-ASSEMBLERS.
GO ON.
SUBORN GAVCORPS SUPPLY CHAIN SOMEWHERE, AND SMUGGLE MILSPEC NANO-ASSEMBLERS INTO THE BASE.
ONCE YOU'VE SUFFICIENTLY INFILTRATED THE BASE, THE ASSEMBLERS LINK UP TO FORM KILLBOTS THE SIZE OF CATS. SWEEP THE BASE WITH EXTREME PREJUDICE. IF THINGS GO SOUTH, THE 'BOTS DETONATE TO DENY THE BASE TO OTHERS.
BUT THE PLAN IS ABSURD. SUBORNING ANYBODY IN GAVCORPS WOULD BE TERRIBLY EXPENSIVE, AND NO MILITARY WILL ADMIT TO HAVING GENOCIDAL NANOTECH ON HAND
THANK YOU, KEVYN! HOW MUCH IS OISR WORTH?


SIR, YOU EXPRESSLY FORBADE ME FROM COLLABORATING TO DETERMINE WHAT OISRI IS. HOW CAN I POSSIBLY PUT A PRICE TAG ON IT?
STOP PLAYING INNOCENT. YOU'RE BORED ON PATROL WITH A PUZZLE RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU. ALSO, I GAVE YOU AN ORDER WITH LOOPHOLES IN IT
NOW TELL ME, HOW MUCH WOULD AN UNSCRUPULOUS GOVERNMENT INVEST TO PERMANENTLY SECURE OISRI FOR THEMSELVES?
A FLEET, MAYBE TWO. MAYBE HALF EARTH'S ANNUAL GDP IF THEY HAD FIRM DATA.
WITH AN ENEMY BUDGET THAT BIG, SIR, I'D HAVE TO BE CRAZY TO WORK ON YOUR SIDE.
THEN IT'S A GOOD THING YOU'RE NOT ON YOUR MEDS THIS WEEK, LIEUTENANT

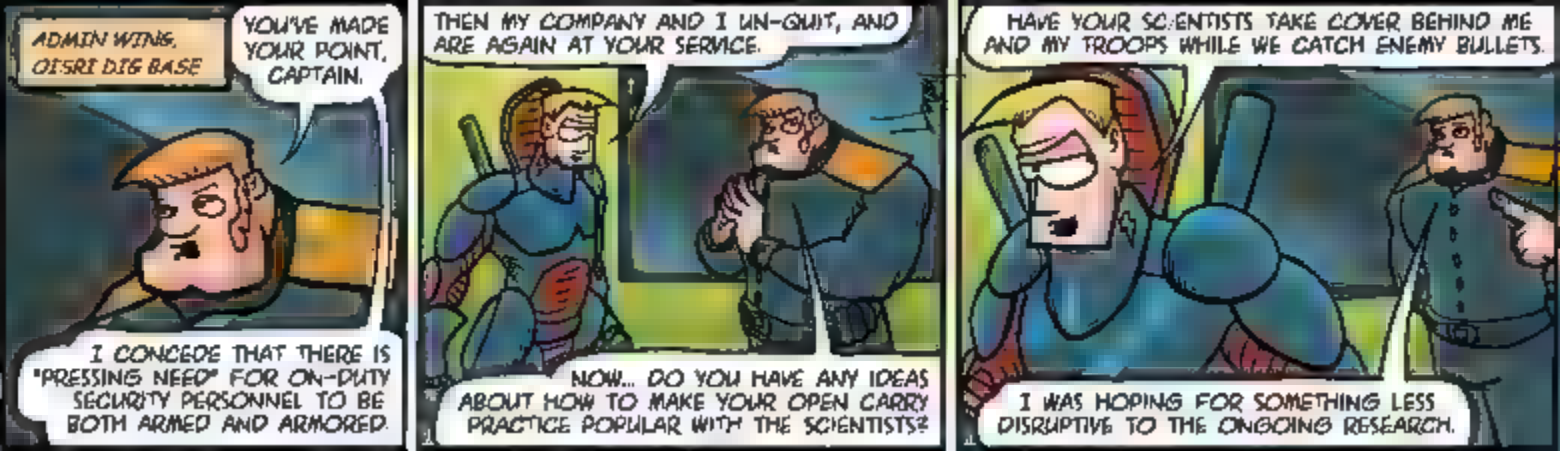

SO WE AGREE THAT THE BEST WAY FOR THE ENEMY TO TAKE OISRI DIG BASE INTACT IS FOR THEM TO SPEND A HUGE FORTUNE AND SMUGGLE A FORCE IN.
OUR RESIDENT MAD SCIENTIST SAYS THAT THE INVESTMENT OF THAT HUGE FORTUNE WOULD PROBABLY PAY OFF
SIR, WHO EXACTLY ARE YOU RECAPPING FOR?
IF THESE WALLS DON'T HAVE EARS I'LL EAT YOUR PILLS.
CAPTAIN TAGON, PLEASE COME BACK TO MY OFFICE IN THE ADMIN WING. WE MAY NEED TO RENEGOTIATE YOUR TERMS.
OHHH.. PARANOIA THAT PAYS OFF ON CUE GIVES ME CHILLS.

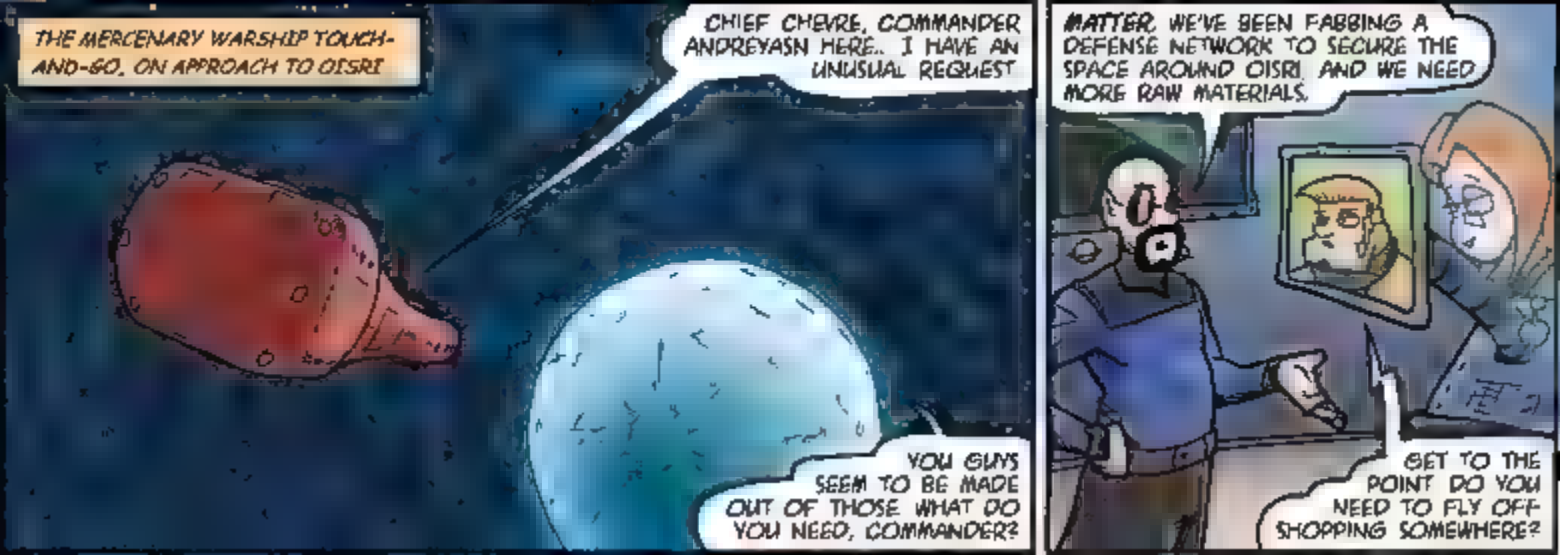

TAILOR! POP MY LOCKER AND SUIT ME UP!
Expecting trouble, sir?
NO.
SUIT EVERYBODY ELSE UP TOO. SHODAN, PREP FOR A HOT EVAC.
I'M NOT EXPECTING ANY TROUBLE AT ALL, WHICH MAKES THIS AN IDEAL TIME FOR OUR HYPOTHETICAL ENEMY TO DO HORRIBLE THINGS.

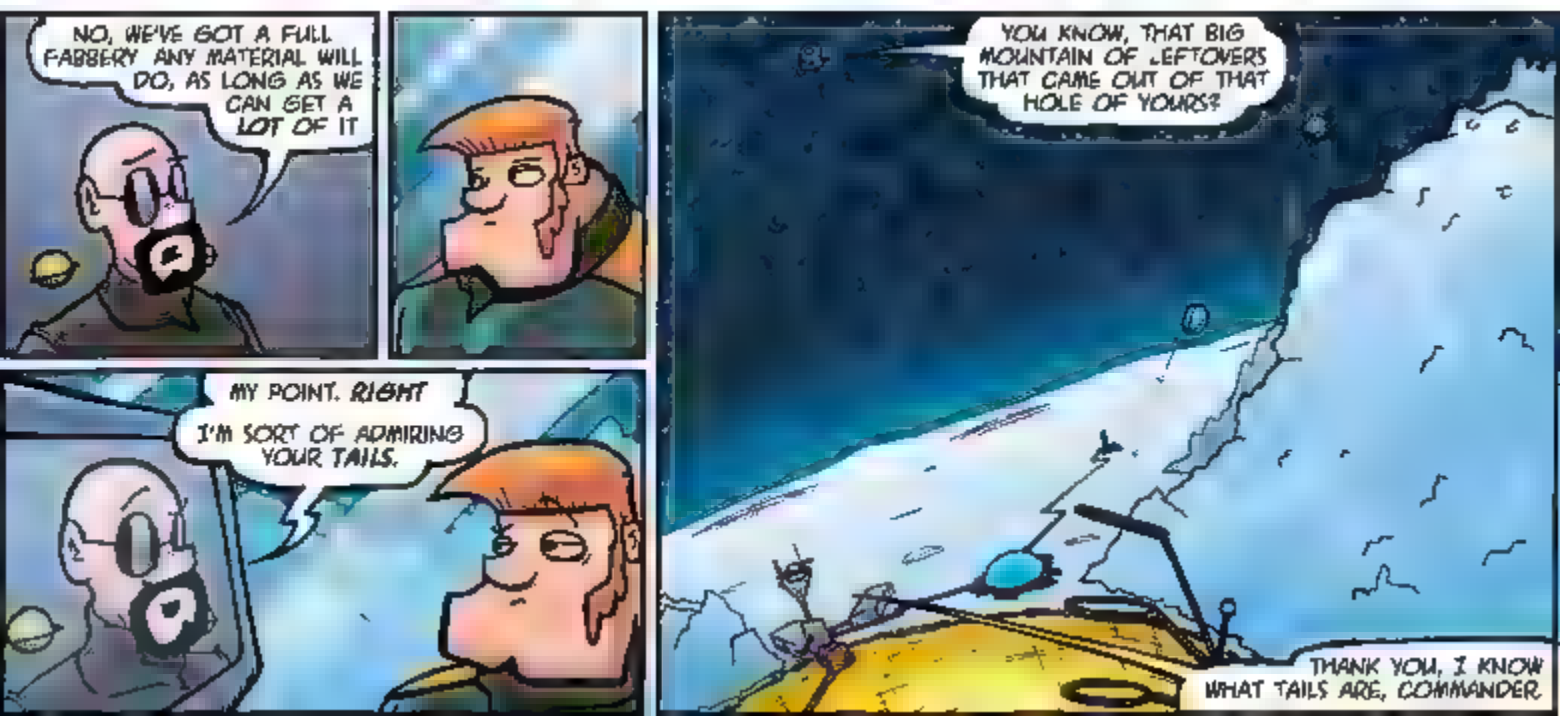

CAPTAIN, I THINK WE
WHOA THERE!
DID YOU WALK THE HALLS LIKE THAT? LIKE
DIRTY HARRY, ALL "MAKE MY DAY" WITH A
YY SWINGING AT ARM'S LENGTH?
I DON'T KNOW WHAT A DIRTY HARRY IS, BUT
WALKING YOUR HALLS IN FULL KIT DID
KIND OF MAKE MY DAY


BARRACKS, SECURITY WING, OTSRI DIG BASE
Where's mine?


I'm sorry, Sergeant. I don't have armor for you. Your physiology poses some non-trivial design problems.
Hmph. You didn't have any problems armoring Chsulo.
Those were mostly problems of scale.
AND TYING MY EARS BEHIND MY HEAD

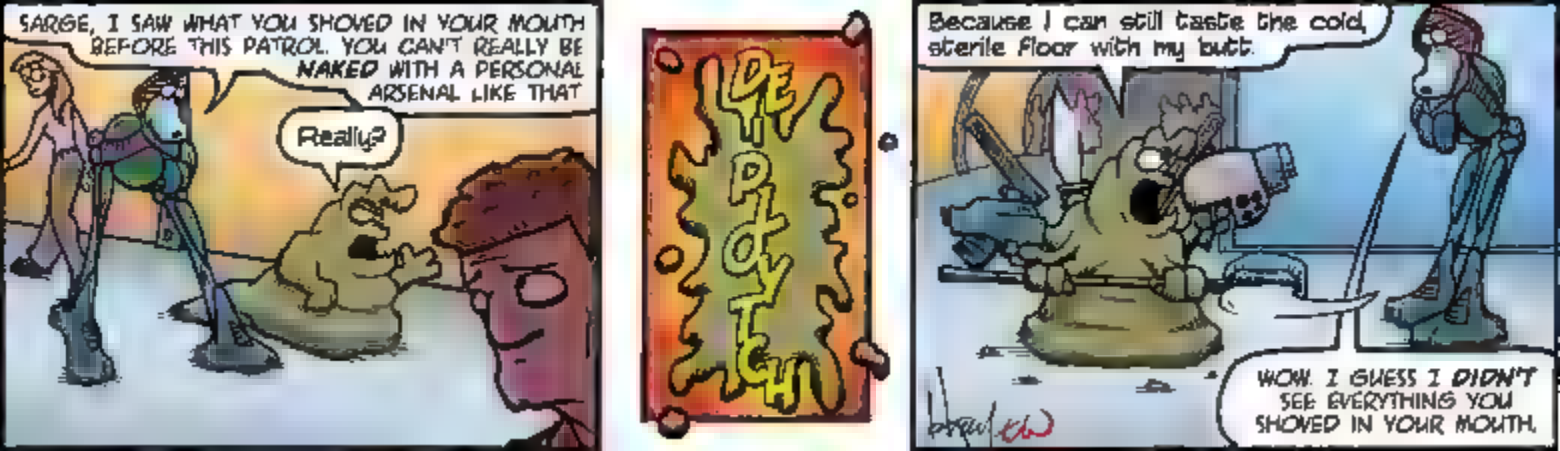

ADMIN WING, OTSRI DIG BASE
YOU'VE MADE YOUR POINT, CAPTAIN.
I CONCEDE THAT THERE IS "PRESSING NEED" FOR ON-DUTY SECURITY PERSONNEL TO BE BOTH ARMED AND ARMORED.
THEN MY COMPANY AND I UN-QUIT, AND ARE AGAIN AT YOUR SERVICE.
NOW... DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEAS ABOUT HOW TO MAKE YOUR OPEN CARRY PRACTICE POPULAR WITH THE SCIENTISTS?
HAVE YOUR SCIENTISTS TAKE COVER BEHIND ME AND MY TROOPS WHILE WE CATCH ENEMY BULLETS.
I WAS HOPING FOR SOMETHING LESS DISRUPTIVE TO THE ONGOING RESEARCH.

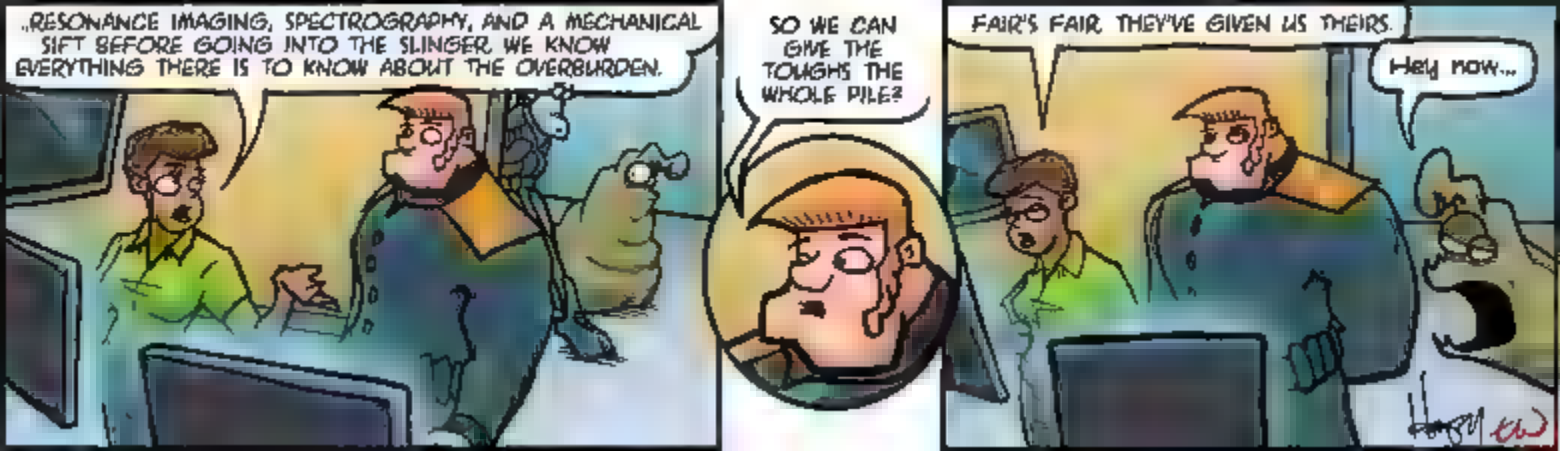

THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO, ON APPROACH TO OISRI
CHIEF CHEVRE, COMMANDER ANDREYASN HERE.. I HAVE AN UNUSUAL REQUEST
YOU GUYS SEEM TO BE MADE OUT OF THOSE. WHAT DO YOU NEED, COMMANDER?
MATTER. WE'VE BEEN FABBING A DEFENSE NETWORK TO SECURE THE SPACE AROUND OISRI, AND WE NEED MORE RAW MATERIALS.
GET TO THE POINT. DO YOU NEED TO FLY OFF SHOPPING SOMEWHERE?

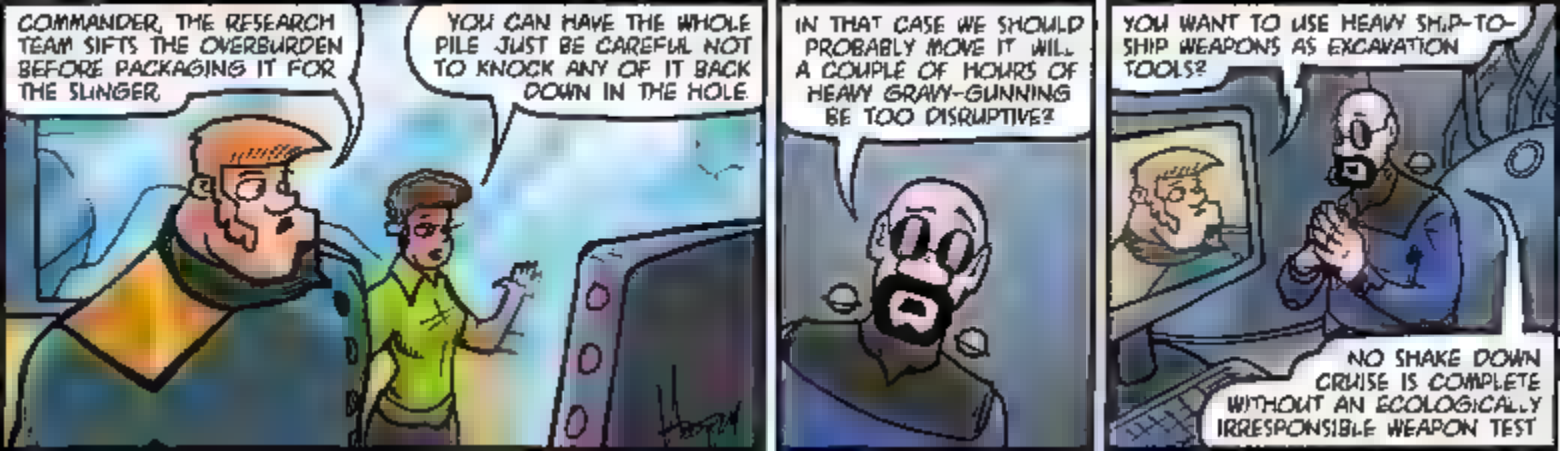

NO, WE'VE GOT A FULL FABBERY. ANY MATERIAL WILL DO, AS LONG AS WE CAN GET A LOT OF IT
MY POINT. RIGHT
I'M SORT OF ADMIRING YOUR TAILS.
YOU KNOW, THAT BIG MOUNTAIN OF LEFTOVERS THAT CAME OUT OF THAT HOLE OF YOURS?
THANK YOU, I KNOW WHAT TAILS ARE, COMMANDER


I'LL CHECK WITH THE DIG TEAM AND SEE IF THEY NEED THAT PILE.
THEY'RE NOT DONE WITH IT?
IT'S OVERBURDEN, NOT TAILINGS. IT'S JUST THE STUFF BETWEEN US AND WHATEVER LIES AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HOLE.
WAIT.. THEY HAVEN'T SIFTED IT YET?
I DON'T KNOW. LIKE I SAID, I'LL HAVE TO CHECK.
NOW I REALLY WANT IT ALSO, I WANT A BILLION ARCHEOLOGY GRADS WITH TEENY-TINY BRUSHES AND NUMBERED BAGS.

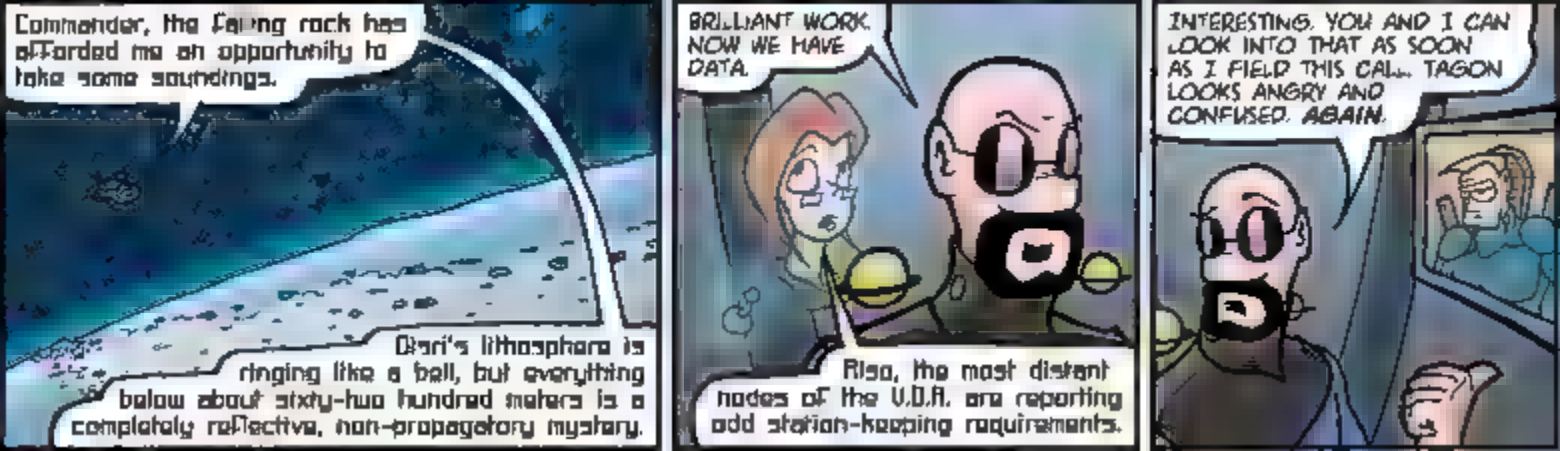

Status report from Captain Tagon. Our contract has been amended to allow the ground team to wear full battle dress at all times.
HE PLAYED THAT PRETTY WELL, BUT IT'S STILL GOING TO MAKE SOME FOLKS UNHAPPY.
MEANWHILE
YOU LOOK UNHAPPY.
'Unhappy' is just another word for 'naked.'

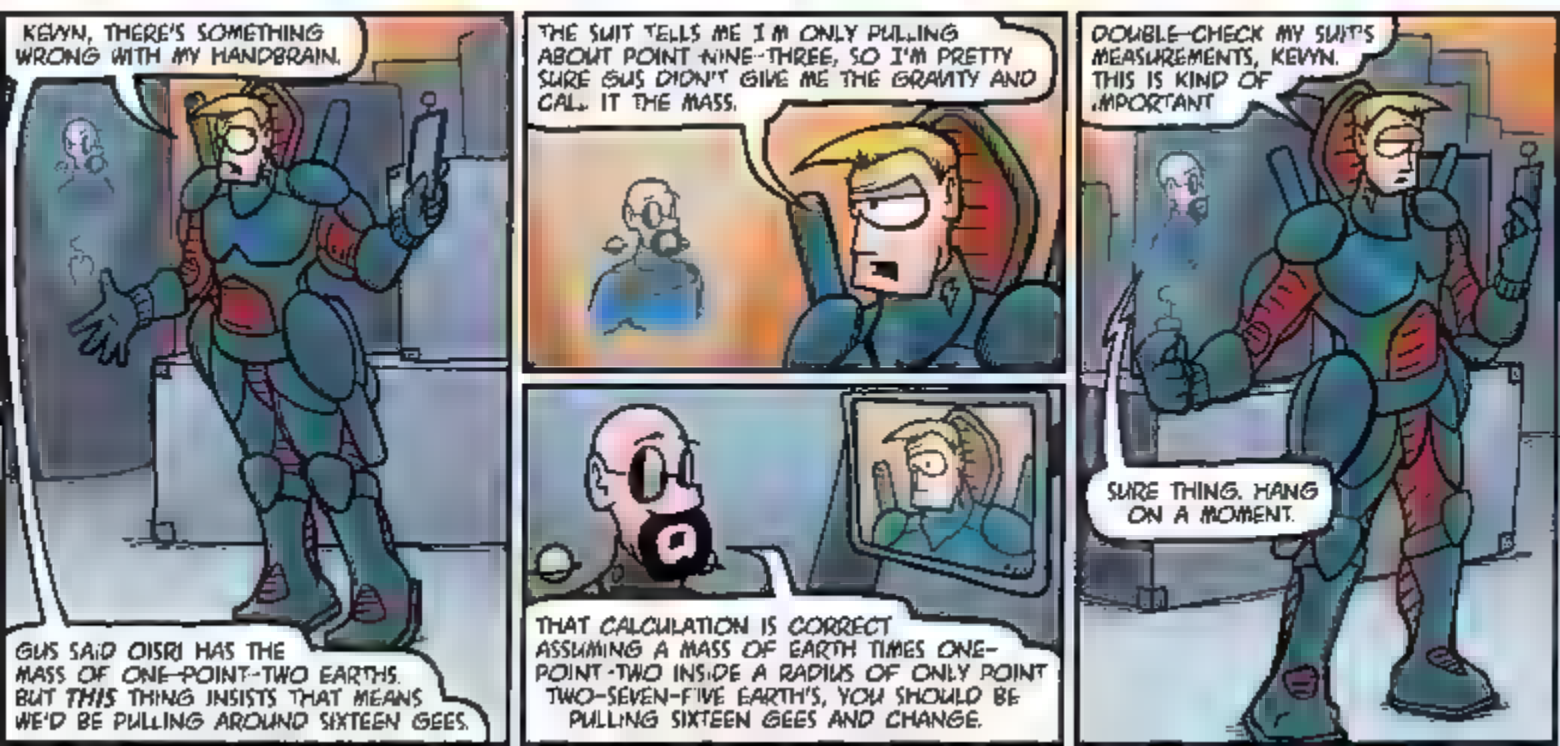

SARGE, I SAW WHAT YOU SHOVED IN YOUR MOUTH BEFORE THIS PATROL. YOU CAN'T REALLY BE NAKED WITH A PERSONAL ARSENAL LIKE THAT
Really?
DEPOTECH
Because I can still taste the cold, sterile floor with my butt.
WOW. I GUESS I DIDN'T SEE EVERYTHING YOU SHOVED IN YOUR MOUTH.

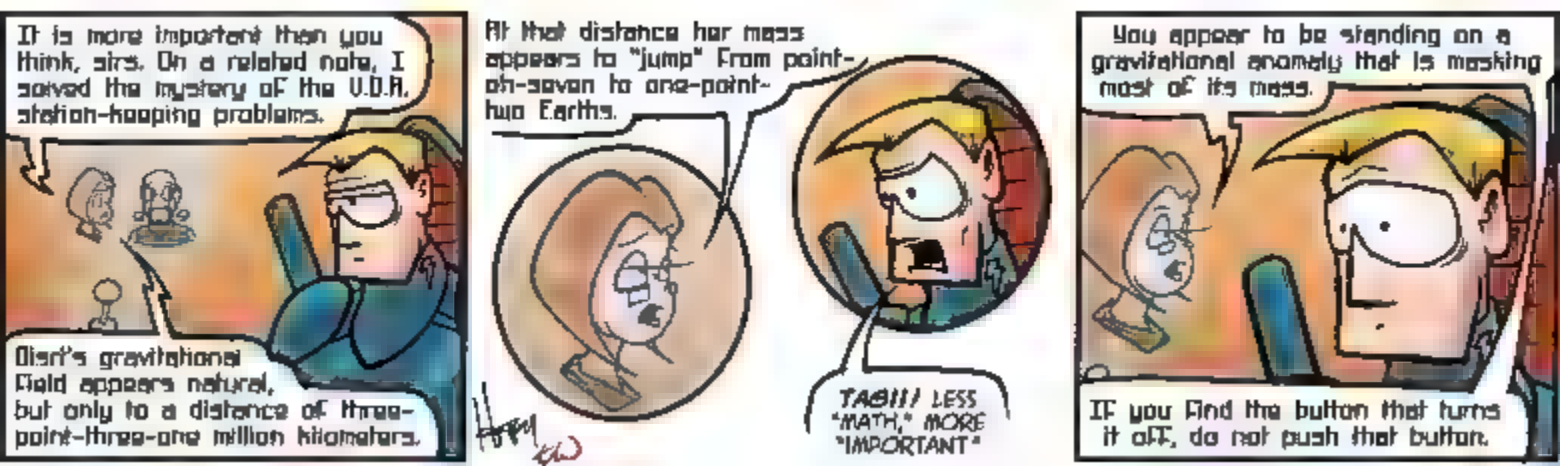

..RESONANCE IMAGING, SPECTROGRAPHY, AND A MECHANICAL SIFT BEFORE GOING INTO THE SLINGER. WE KNOW EVERYTHING THERE IS TO KNOW ABOUT THE OVERBURDEN.
SO WE CAN GIVE THE TOUGHS THE WHOLE PILE?
FAIR'S FAIR. THEY'VE GIVEN US THEIRS.
Hey now...

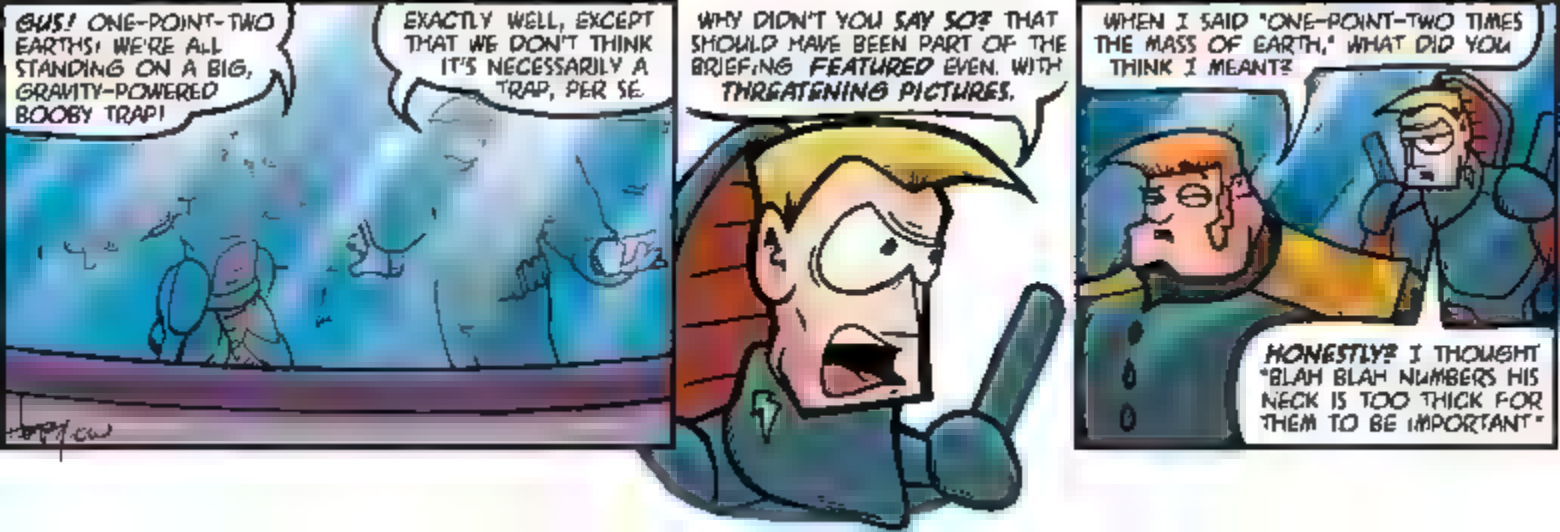

COMMANDER, THE RESEARCH TEAM SIFTS THE OVERBURDEN BEFORE PACKAGING IT FOR THE SLINGER
YOU CAN HAVE THE WHOLE PILE JUST BE CAREFUL NOT TO KNOCK ANY OF IT BACK DOWN IN THE HOLE
IN THAT CASE WE SHOULD PROBABLY MOVE IT WILL A COUPLE OF HOURS OF HEAVY GRAVY-GUNNING BE TOO DISRUPTIVE?
YOU WANT TO USE HEAVY SHIP-TO-SHIP WEAPONS AS EXCAVATION TOOLS?
NO SHAKE DOWN CRUISE IS COMPLETE WITHOUT AN ECOLOGICALLY IRRESPONSIBLE WEAPON TEST


KEEP THE FOCUS TIGHT WE CAN'T AFFORD COLLATERAL DAMAGE, TAGII.
Please, Commander This is what I do.
REALLY? I THINK THIS IS THE FIRST TIME YOU'VE USED YOUR GRAVY GUNS TO ALTER GEOGRAPHY
True, but I've spent more CPU cycles than you'll have in a dozen lifetimes imagining these perfect, delicious moments.

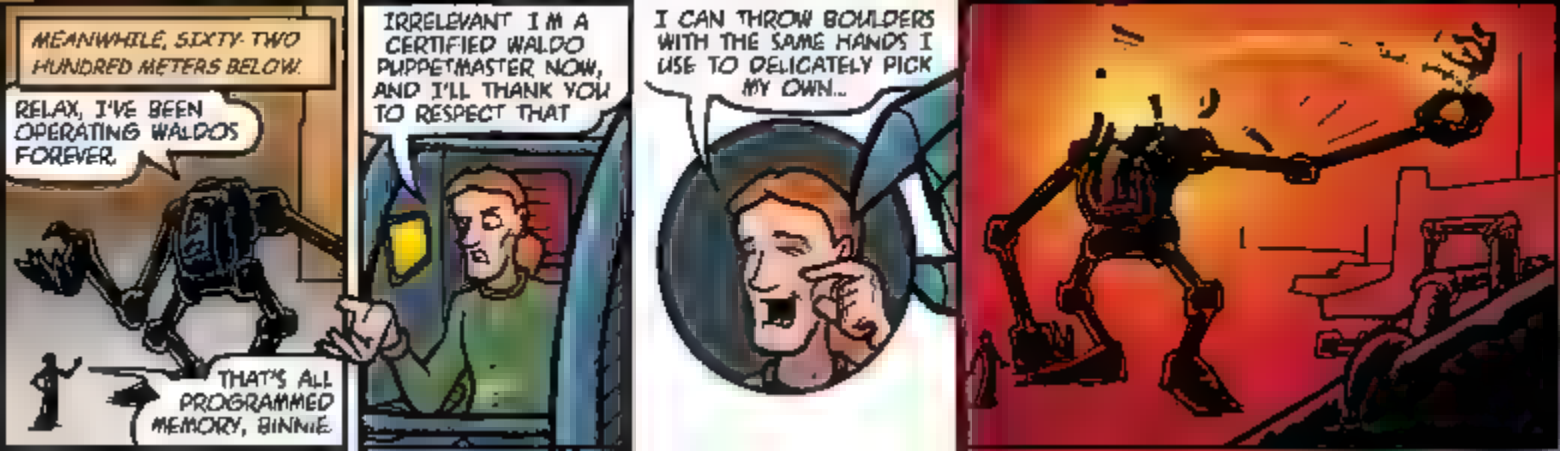

Commander, the falling rock has afforded me an opportunity to take some soundings.
Dari's lithosphere is ringing like a bell, but everything below about sixty-two hundred meters is a completely reflective, non-propagatory mystery.
BRILLIANT WORK. NOW WE HAVE DATA.
Riso, the most distant nodes of the V.D.A. are reporting odd station-keeping requirements.
INTERESTING. YOU AND I CAN LOOK INTO THAT AS SOON AS I FIELD THIS CALL. TAGON LOOKS ANGRY AND CONFUSED. AGAIN.

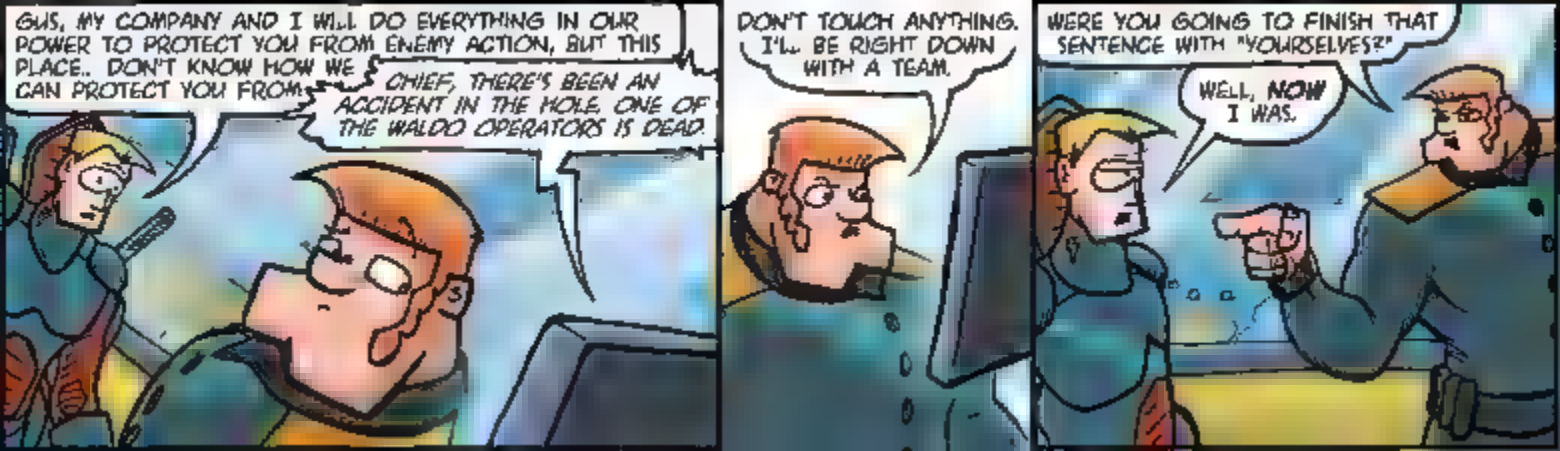

KEVYN, THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH MY HANDBRAIN.
GUS SAID OISRI HAS THE MASS OF ONE-POINT-TWO EARTHS. BUT THIS THING INSISTS THAT MEANS WE'D BE PULLING AROUND SIXTEEN GEES.
THE SUIT TELLS ME I M ONLY PULLING ABOUT POINT-NINE-THREE, SO I'M PRETTY SURE GUS DIDN'T GIVE ME THE GRAVITY AND CAL. IT THE MASS.
THAT CALCULATION IS CORRECT ASSUMING A MASS OF EARTH TIMES ONE-POINT-TWO INSIDE A RADIUS OF ONLY POINT TWO-SEVEN-FIVE EARTH'S, YOU SHOULD BE PULLING SIXTEEN GEES AND CHANGE.
DOUBLE-CHECK MY SUIT'S MEASUREMENTS, KEVYN. THIS IS KIND OF IMPORTANT
SURE THING. HANG ON A MOMENT.


It is more important than you think, sirs. On a related note, I solved the mystery of the U.O.A. station-keeping problems.
Dust's gravitational field appears natural, but only to a distance of three-point-three-one million kilometers.
At that distance her mass appears to "jump" from point-oh-seven to one-point-two Earths.
TAG!!! LESS "MATH," MORE "IMPORTANT"
You appear to be standing on a gravitational anomaly that is masking most of its mass.
If you find the button that turns it off, do not push that button.

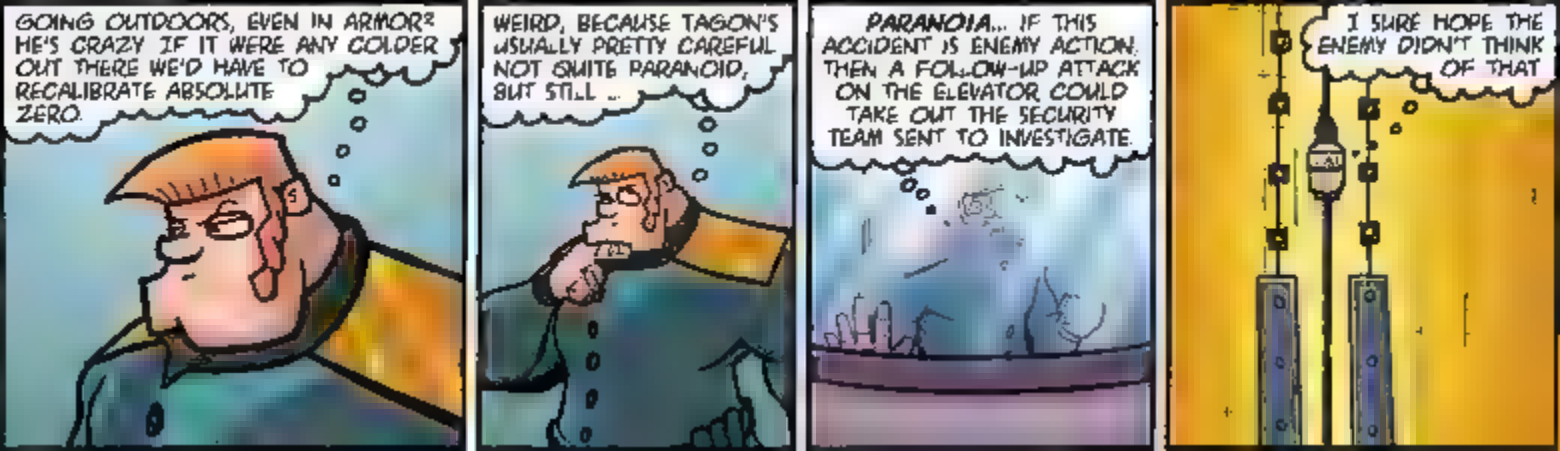

GUS! ONE-POINT-TWO EARTHS! WE'RE ALL STANDING ON A BIG, GRAVITY-POWERED BOOBY TRAP!
EXACTLY. WELL, EXCEPT THAT WE DON'T THINK IT'S NECESSARILY A TRAP, PER SE.
WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY SO? THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN PART OF THE BRIEFING. FEATURED EVEN. WITH THREATENING PICTURES.
WHEN I SAID "ONE-POINT-TWO TIMES THE MASS OF EARTH," WHAT DID YOU THINK I MEANT?
HONESTLY? I THOUGHT "BLAH BLAH NUMBERS HIS NECK IS TOO THICK FOR THEM TO BE IMPORTANT."

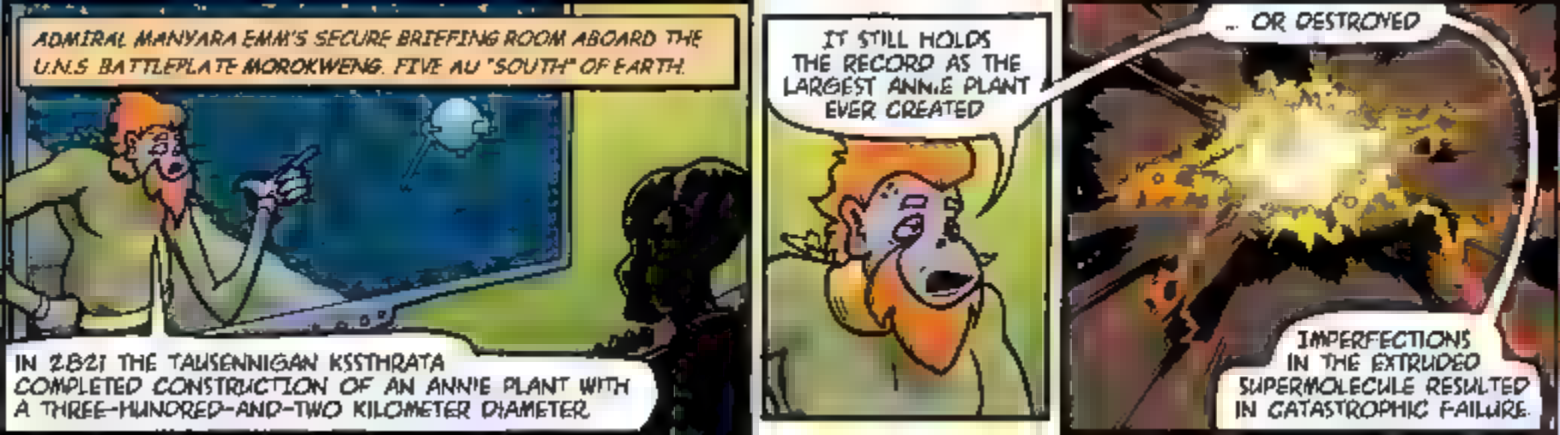

THIS... PLANET-THING? IT'S PROTECTING US FROM THE CRUSHING ATTRACTION OF ITS MASS.
YES.
DO YOU KNOW HOW IT'S DOING IT?
NO.
BUT YOU PEOPLE ARE STILL DIGGING A HOLE IN IT AND POKING AROUND?
YES. AND THE SCIENTISTS FEEL SAFER WITH THAT THAN THEY DO WITH YOU AND YOUR OPENLY CARRIED WEAPONS.
AND YES, I SAW THAT IRONY COMING, AND SHOT FIRST.


MEANWHILE, SIXTY-TWO HUNDRED METERS BELOW.
RELAX, I'VE BEEN OPERATING WALDOS FOREVER.
THAT'S ALL PROGRAMMED MEMORY, BINNIE.
IRRELEVANT. I'M A CERTIFIED WALDO PUPPETMASTER NOW, AND I'LL THANK YOU TO RESPECT THAT.
I CAN THROW BOULDERS WITH THE SAME HANDS I USE TO DELICATELY PICK MY OWN...

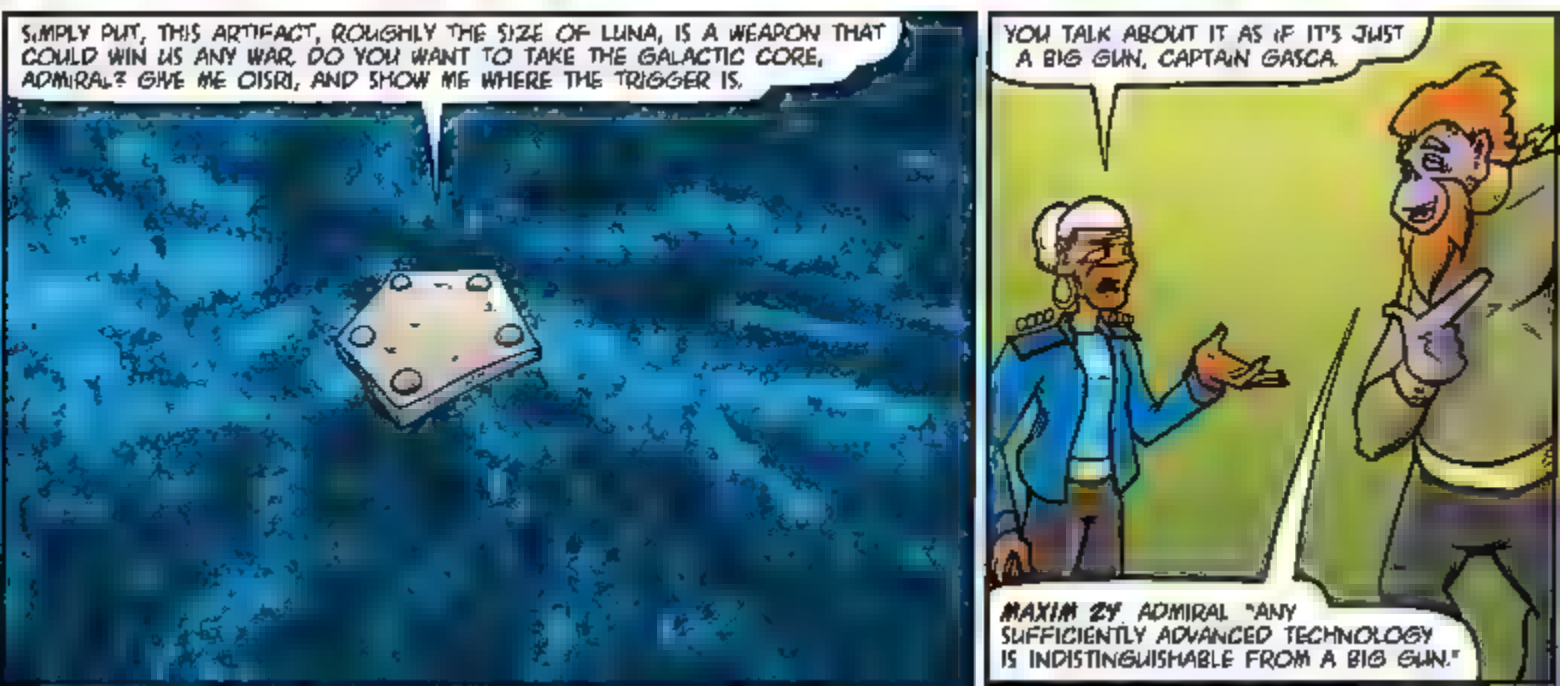

GUS, MY COMPANY AND I WILL DO EVERYTHING IN OUR POWER TO PROTECT YOU FROM ENEMY ACTION, BUT THIS PLACE.. DON'T KNOW HOW WE CAN PROTECT YOU FROM-
CHIEF, THERE'S BEEN AN ACCIDENT IN THE HOLE. ONE OF THE WALDO OPERATORS IS DEAD.
DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING. I'LL BE RIGHT DOWN WITH A TEAM.
WERE YOU GOING TO FINISH THAT SENTENCE WITH "YOURSELVES?"
WELL, NOW I WAS.


YOU COMING?
OF COURSE I'M COMING
THE ACCIDENT WAS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HOLE THE LIFTS ARE RIGHT THIS.. WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
AIRLOCK. I HAVEN'T BEEN OUTSIDE YET
IT'S A SIX KILOMETER CLIMB, CAPTAIN.
I'LL JUMP
YOU COMING?

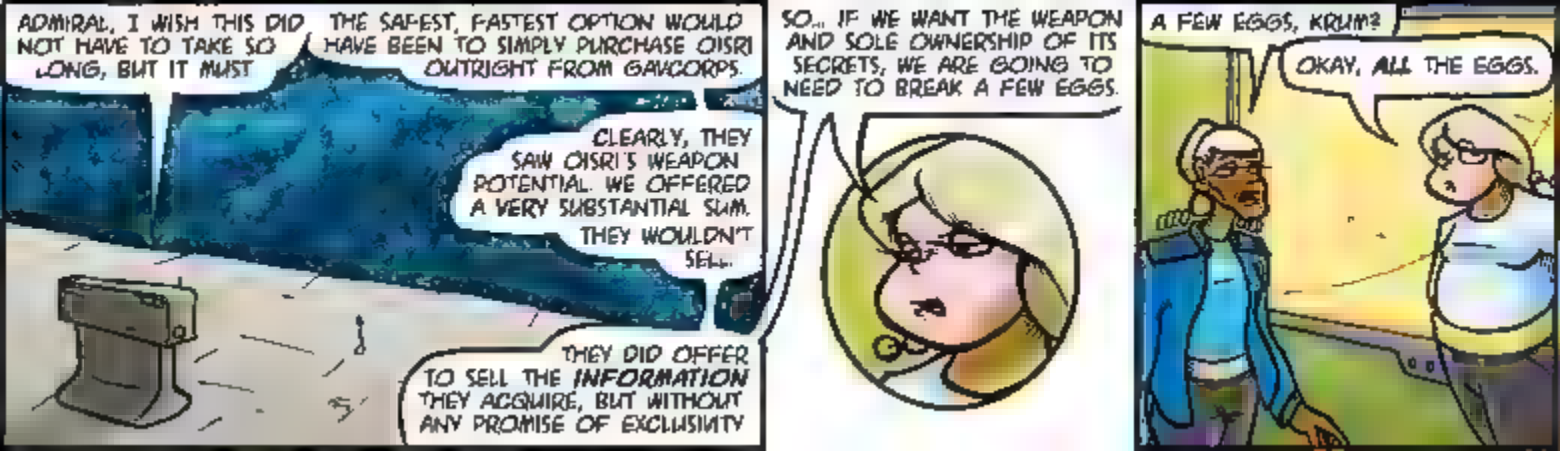

GOING OUTDOORS, EVEN IN ARMOR? HE'S CRAZY IF IT WERE ANY COLDER OUT THERE WE'D HAVE TO RECALIBRATE ABSOLUTE ZERO.
WEIRD, BECAUSE TAGON'S USUALLY PRETTY CAREFUL. NOT QUITE PARANOID, BUT STILL ...
PARANOIA... IF THIS ACCIDENT IS ENEMY ACTION, THEN A FOLLOW-UP ATTACK ON THE ELEVATOR COULD TAKE OUT THE SECURITY TEAM SENT TO INVESTIGATE.
I SURE HOPE THE ENEMY DIDN'T THINK OF THAT

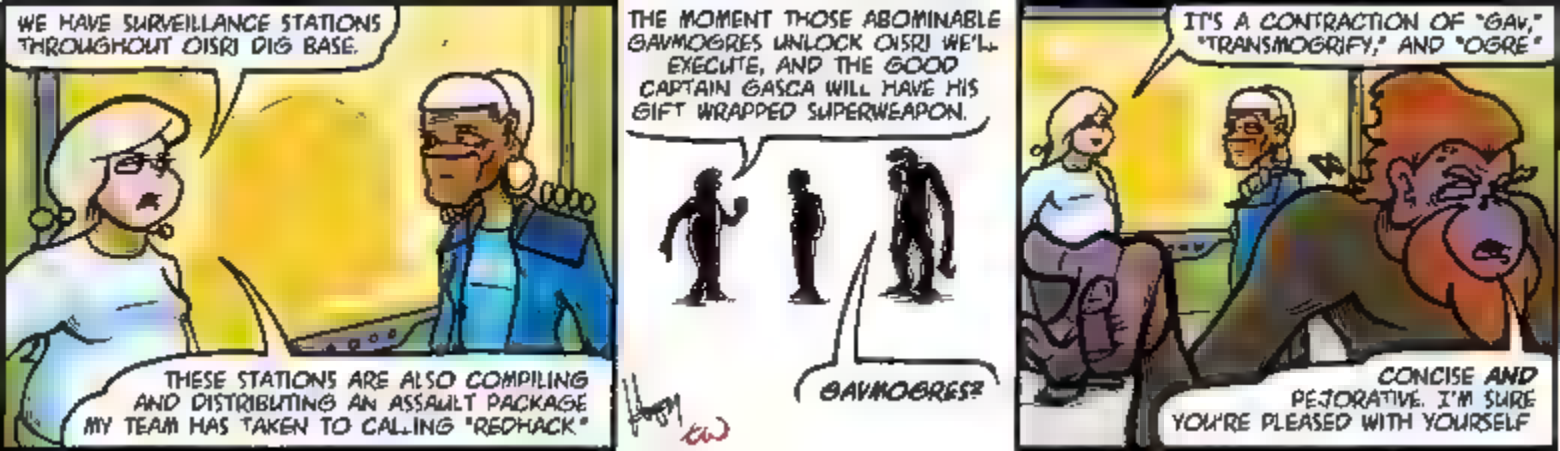

ADMIRAL MANYARA EMM'S SECURE BRIEFING ROOM ABOARD THE U.N.S BATTLEPLATE MOROKWENG. FIVE AU "SOUTH" OF EARTH.
IN 2821 THE TAUSENNIGAN KSSTHRATA COMPLETED CONSTRUCTION OF AN ANNIE PLANT WITH A THREE-HUNDRED-AND-TWO KILOMETER DIAMETER
IT STILL HOLDS THE RECORD AS THE LARGEST ANNIE PLANT EVER CREATED
... OR DESTROYED
IMPERFECTIONS IN THE EXTRUDED SUPERMOLECULE RESULTED IN CATASTROPHIC FAILURE.

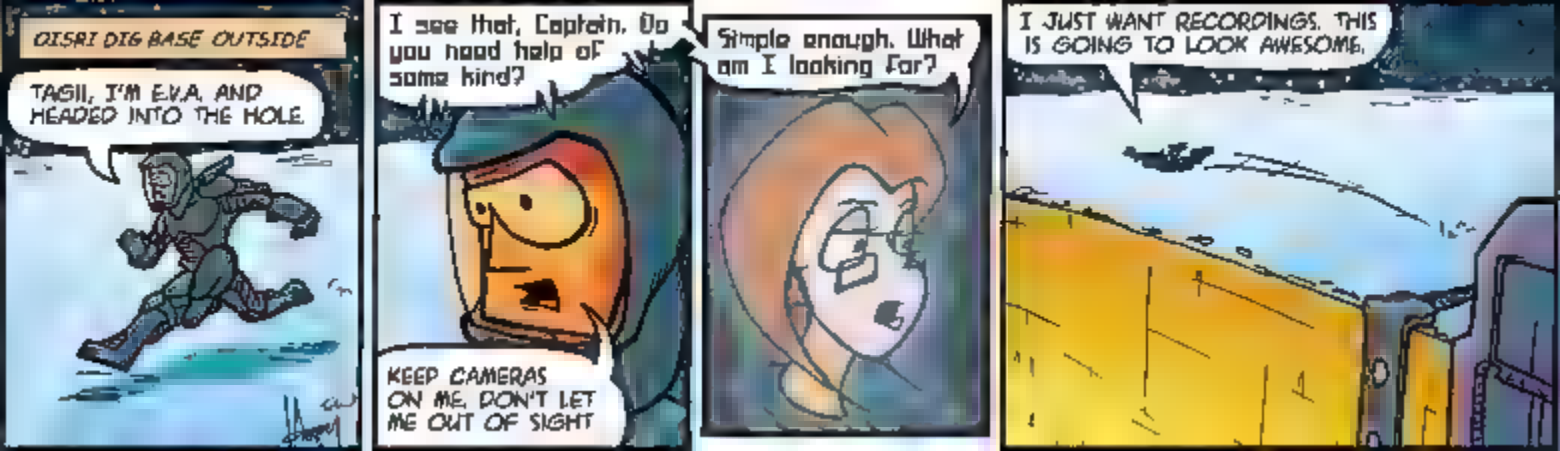

BUT IN ITS FIFTEEN SECONDS OF GLORIOUS OPERATION SSTHRA'S FOLLY DEMONSTRATED THAT THE ANNIE PLANT POWER CURVE HOLDS TRUE BIGGER IS EXPONENTIALLY BETTER
AND NOW FOR THE POINT OF THIS HISTORY LESSON...
OISRI APPEARS TO BE AN ANNIE PLANT OVER TEN TIMES THE DIAMETER OF SSTHRA'S FOLLY, AND CLOSE TO A THOUSAND TIMES THE DIAMETER OF THE LARGEST PLANTS WE CAN CONFIDENTLY BUILD
UNLIKE SSTHRA'S FOLLY, OISRI IS OPERATIONAL, AND HAS BEEN SINCE BEFORE YOUR ANCESTORS LEFT THE TREES.


SIMPLY PUT, THIS ARTIFACT, ROUGHLY THE SIZE OF LUNA, IS A WEAPON THAT COULD WIN US ANY WAR. DO YOU WANT TO TAKE THE GALACTIC CORE, ADMIRAL? GIVE ME OISRI, AND SHOW ME WHERE THE TRIGGER IS.
YOU TALK ABOUT IT AS IF IT'S JUST A BIG GUN, CAPTAIN GASCA.
MAXIM ZY ADMIRAL "ANY SUFFICIENTLY ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY IS INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM A BIG GUN."

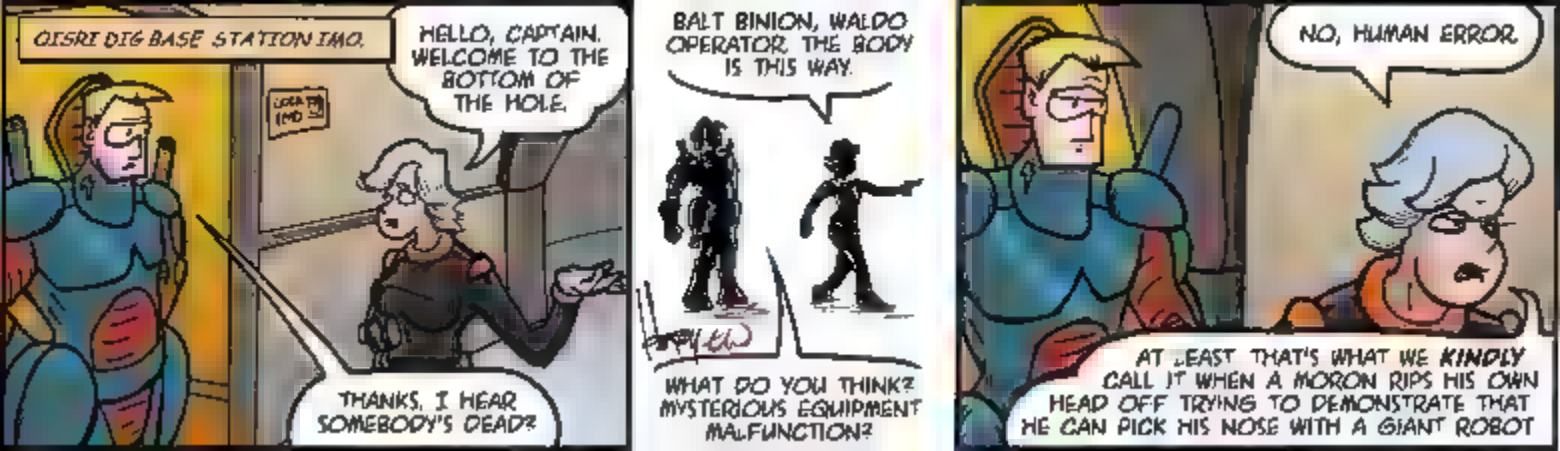

MY RESEARCHERS HAVE DEVOURED AND PROCESSED EVERY SCRAP OF INFORMATION YOUR NEW INTELLIGENCE CHIEF HAS PROVIDED
BUT WE NEED MORE.
DEHAANS WOULD HAVE GIFT WRAPPED OISRI FOR US BY NOW. COLONEL KRUM IS TOO CAUTIOUS.
MAYBE IF COLONEL DEHAANS HAD BEEN MORE CAUTIOUS HE WOULD BE LESS DEAD

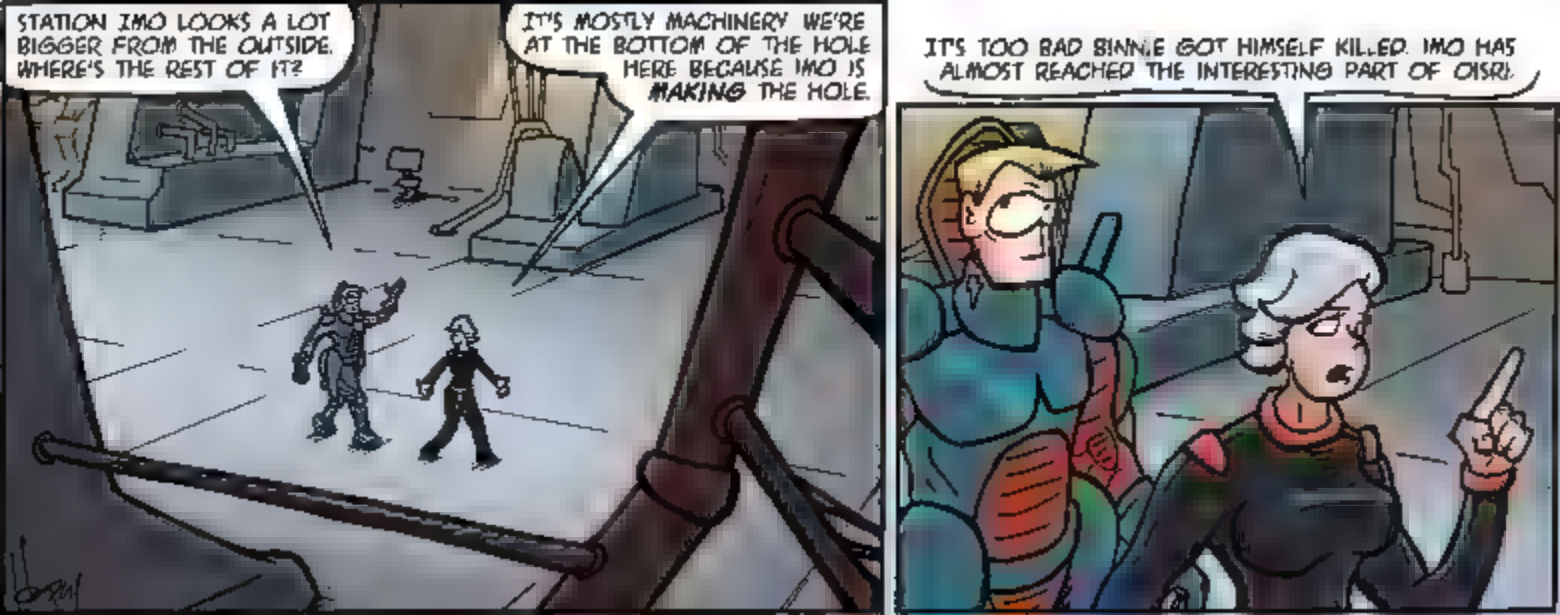

ADMIRAL, I WISH THIS DID NOT HAVE TO TAKE SO LONG, BUT IT MUST
THE SAFEST, FASTEST OPTION WOULD HAVE BEEN TO SIMPLY PURCHASE OISRI OUTRIGHT FROM GAVCORPS.
CLEARLY, THEY SAW OISRI'S WEAPON POTENTIAL. WE OFFERED A VERY SUBSTANTIAL SUM. THEY WOULDN'T SELL.
THEY DID OFFER TO SELL THE INFORMATION THEY ACQUIRE, BUT WITHOUT ANY PROMISE OF EXCLUSIVITY
SO... IF WE WANT THE WEAPON AND SOLE OWNERSHIP OF ITS SECRETS, WE ARE GOING TO NEED TO BREAK A FEW EGGS.
A FEW EGGS, KRUM?
OKAY, ALL THE EGGS.

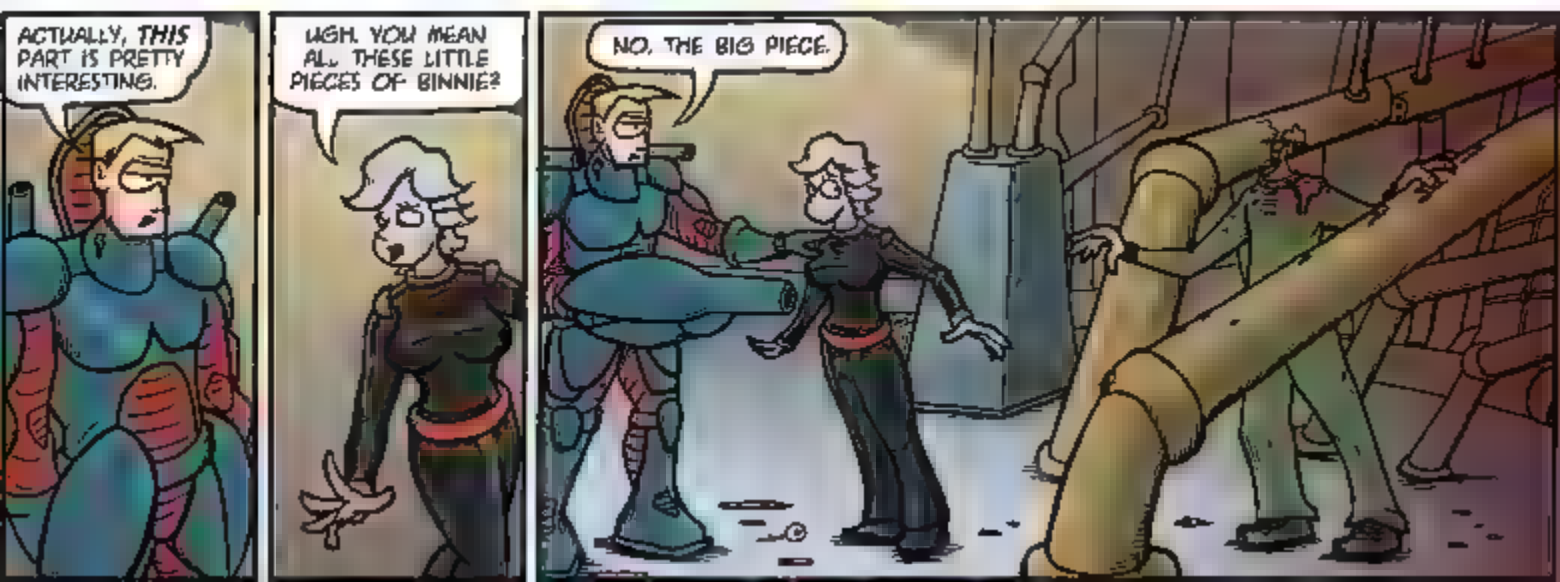

WE HAVE SURVEILLANCE STATIONS THROUGHOUT OISRI DIG BASE.
THESE STATIONS ARE ALSO COMPILING AND DISTRIBUTING AN ASSAULT PACKAGE MY TEAM HAS TAKEN TO CALLING "REDHACK"
THE MOMENT THOSE ABOMINABLE GAVMOGRES UNLOCK OISRI WE'LL EXECUTE, AND THE GOOD CAPTAIN GASCA WILL HAVE HIS GIFT WRAPPED SUPERWEAPON.
GAVMOGRES?
IT'S A CONTRACTION OF "GAV," "TRANSMOGRIFY," AND "OGRE"
CONCISE AND PEJORATIVE. I'M SURE YOU'RE PLEASED WITH YOURSELF

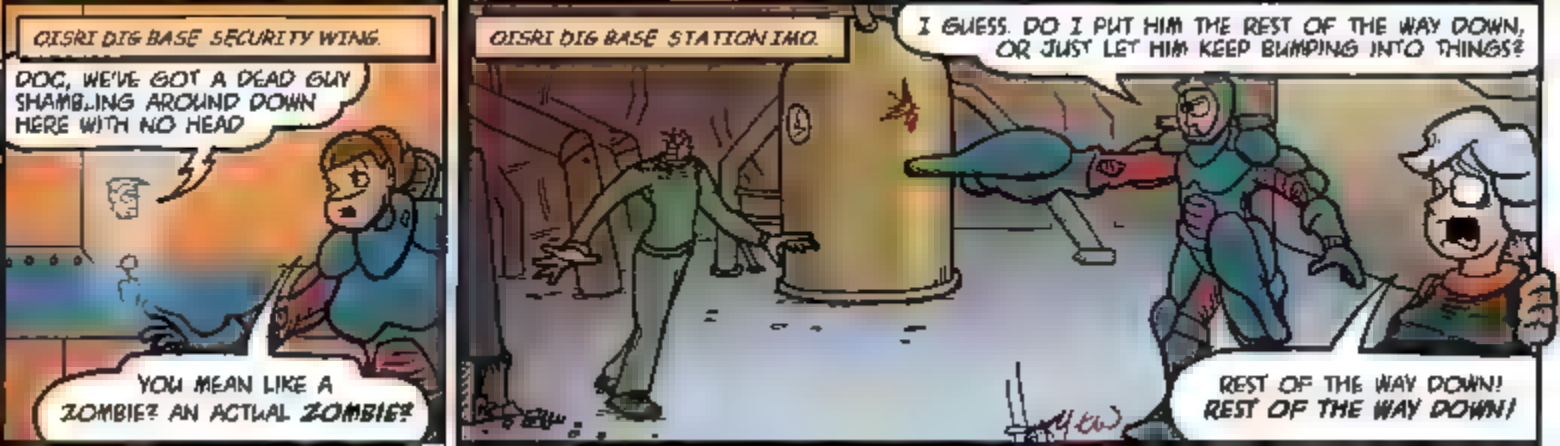

OISRI DIG BASE OUTSIDE
TAGII, I'M E.V.A. AND HEADED INTO THE HOLE.
I see that, Captain. Do you need help of some kind?
KEEP CAMERAS ON ME. DON'T LET ME OUT OF SIGHT
Simple enough. What am I looking for?
I JUST WANT RECORDINGS. THIS IS GOING TO LOOK AWESOME.

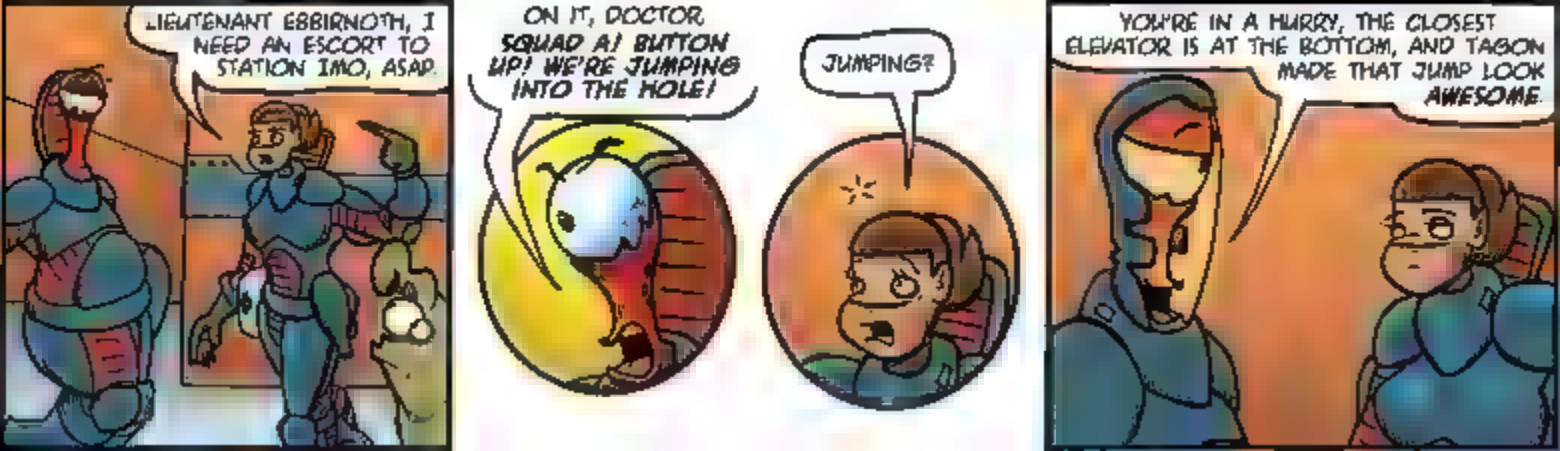

OTSRI DIG BASE ELEVATOR EN ROUTE TO HOLE STATION IMO.
I'M ON MY WAY DOWN NOW, DANITA. PLEASE HAVE SOMEBODY READY AT THE AIRLOCK.
NOT THE ELEVATOR BAY THE AIRLOCK.
BECAUSE CAPTAIN TAGON TOOK A SHORTCUT.


GISRI DIG BASE STATION IMO.
HELLO, CAPTAIN. WELCOME TO THE BOTTOM OF THE HOLE.
THANKS. I HEAR SOMEBODY'S DEAD?
BALT BINION, WALDO OPERATOR. THE BODY IS THIS WAY.
WHAT DO YOU THINK? MYSTERIOUS EQUIPMENT MALFUNCTION?
NO, HUMAN ERROR.
AT LEAST THAT'S WHAT WE KINDLY CALL IT WHEN A MORON RIPS HIS OWN HEAD OFF TRYING TO DEMONSTRATE THAT HE CAN PICK HIS NOSE WITH A GIANT ROBOT


STATION IMO LOOKS A LOT BIGGER FROM THE OUTSIDE. WHERE'S THE REST OF IT?
IT'S MOSTLY MACHINERY WE'RE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HOLE HERE BECAUSE IMO IS MAKING THE HOLE.
IT'S TOO BAD BINNIE GOT HIMSELF KILLED. IMO HAS ALMOST REACHED THE INTERESTING PART OF OISR!

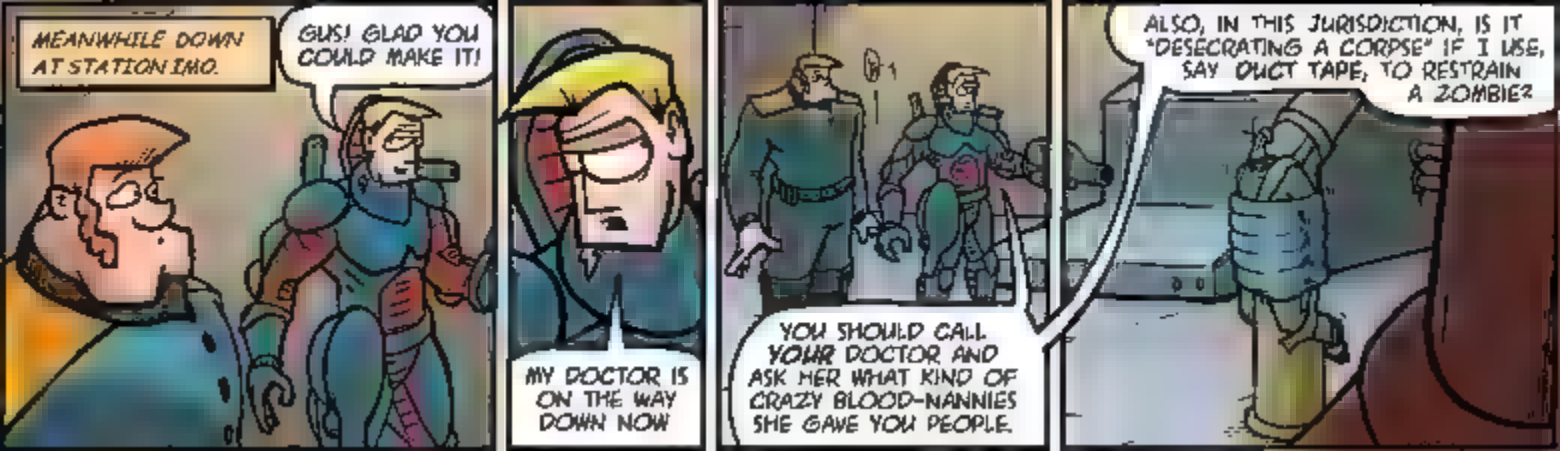

ACTUALLY, THIS PART IS PRETTY INTERESTING.
UGH. YOU MEAN ALL THESE LITTLE PIECES OF BINNIE?
NO. THE BIG PIECE.

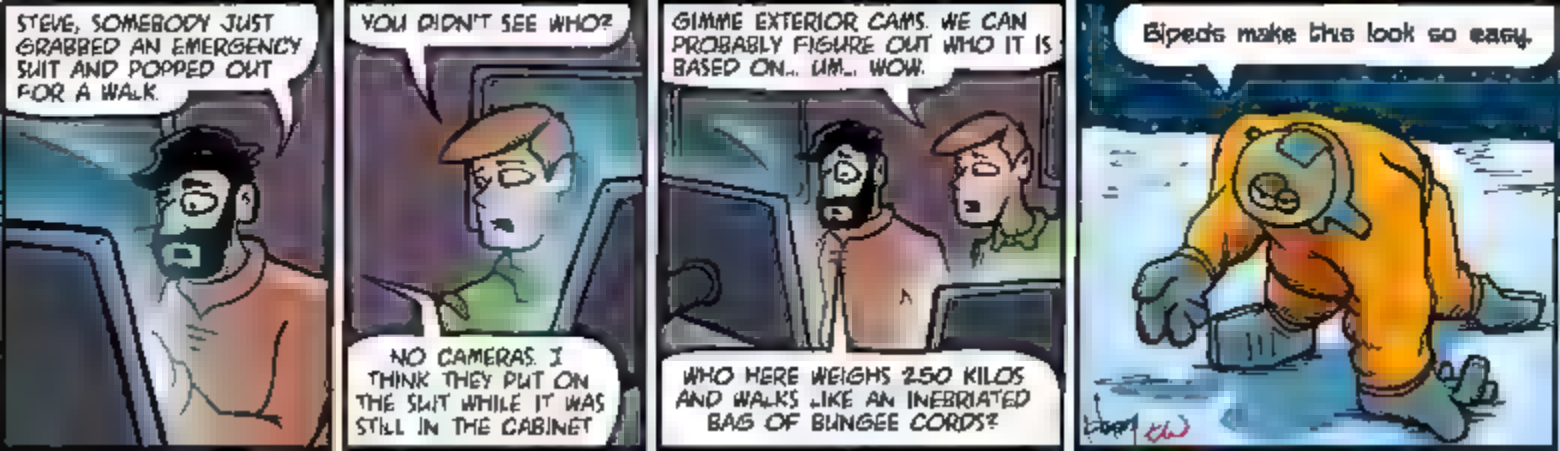

QISRI DIG BASE SECURITY WING.
DOC, WE'VE GOT A DEAD GUY SHAMBLING AROUND DOWN HERE WITH NO HEAD
YOU MEAN LIKE A ZOMBIE? AN ACTUAL ZOMBIE?
QISRI DIG BASE STATION IMO.
I GUESS. DO I PUT HIM THE REST OF THE WAY DOWN, OR JUST LET HIM KEEP BUMPING INTO THINGS?
REST OF THE WAY DOWN!
REST OF THE WAY DOWN!

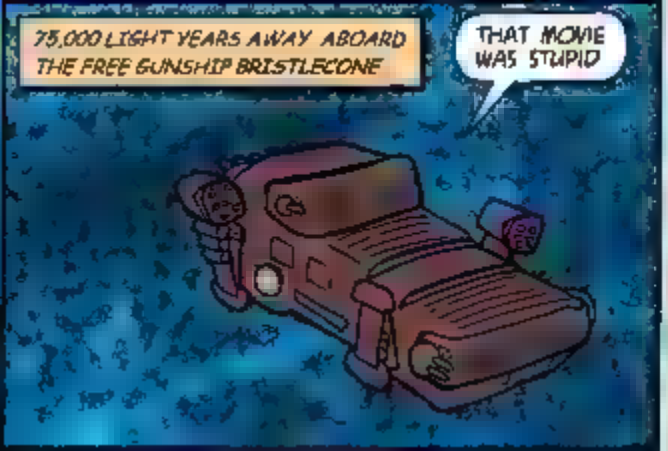

LIEUTENANT EBBIRNOTH, I NEED AN ESCORT TO STATION IMO, ASAP.
ON IT, DOCTOR. SQUAD A! BUTTON UP! WE'RE JUMPING INTO THE HOLE!
JUMPING?
YOU'RE IN A HURRY, THE CLOSEST ELEVATOR IS AT THE BOTTOM, AND TAGON MADE THAT JUMP LOOK AWESOME.

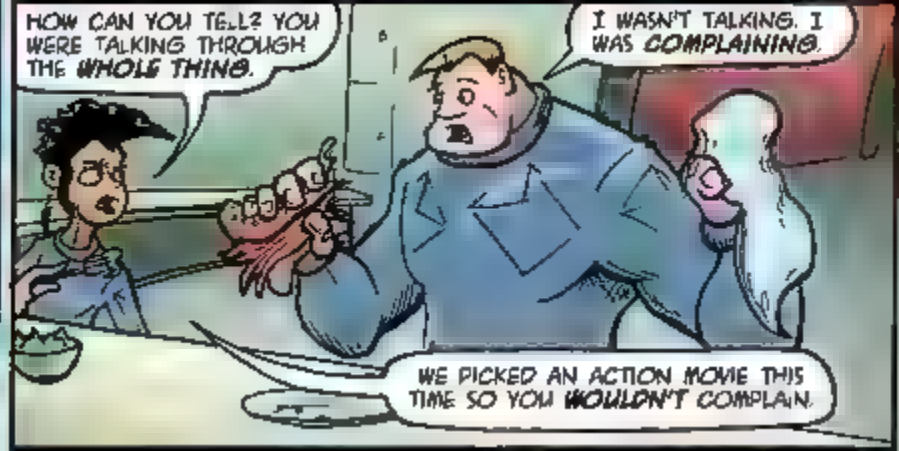


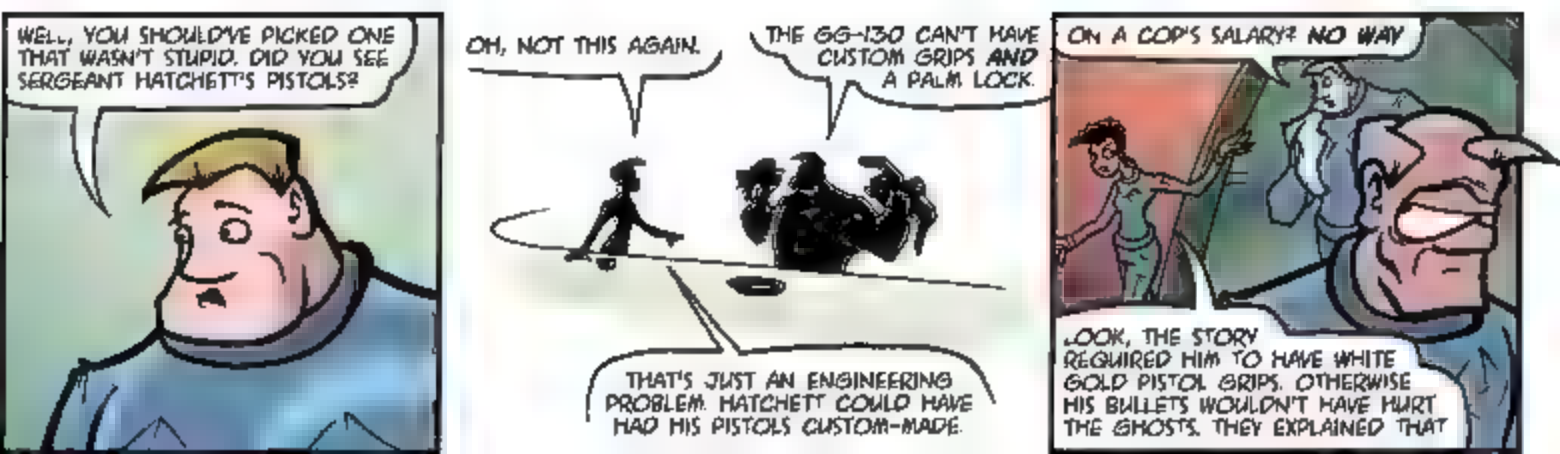

My squad, they just... they just LEFT.
No apologies, no orders to stay... They know that without my own armor, I can't go outside and play.
EMERGENCY EXOSUIT
No orders to stay...

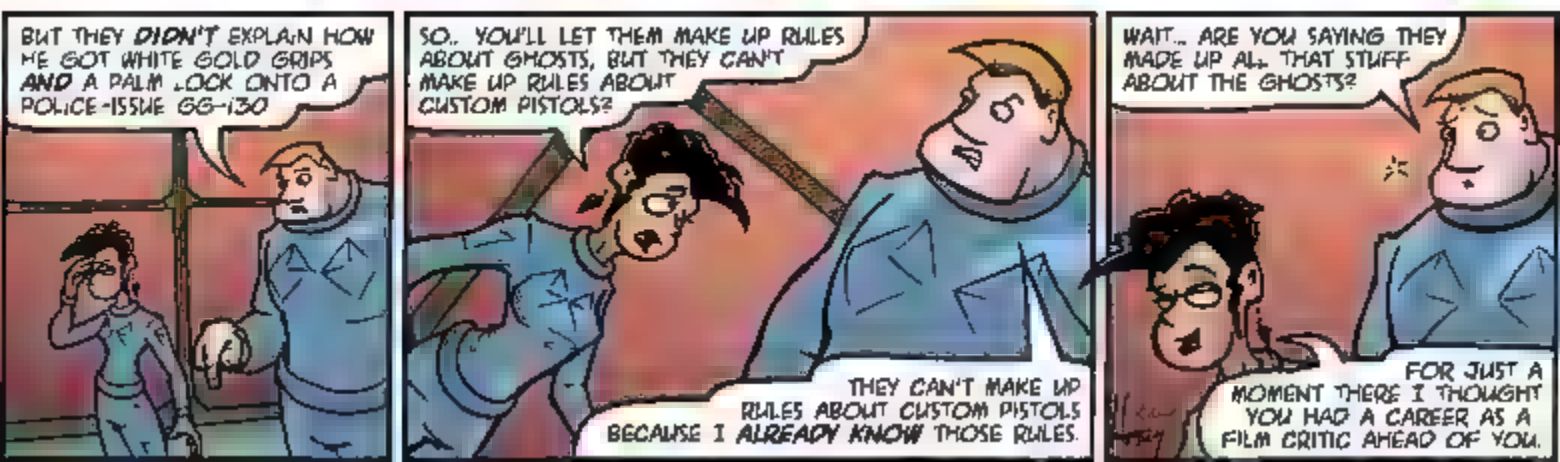

MEANWHILE DOWN AT STATION IMO.
GUS! GLAD YOU COULD MAKE IT!
MY DOCTOR IS ON THE WAY DOWN NOW
YOU SHOULD CALL YOUR DOCTOR AND ASK HER WHAT KIND OF CRAZY BLOOD-NANNIES SHE GAVE YOU PEOPLE.
ALSO, IN THIS JURISDICTION, IS IT "DESECRATING A CORPSE" IF I USE, SAY DUCT TAPE, TO RESTRAIN A ZOMBIE?


STEVE, SOMEBODY JUST GRABBED AN EMERGENCY SUIT AND POPPED OUT FOR A WALK.
YOU DIDN'T SEE WHO?
NO CAMERAS. I THINK THEY PUT ON THE SUIT WHILE IT WAS STILL IN THE CABINET
GIMME EXTERIOR CAMS. WE CAN PROBABLY FIGURE OUT WHO IT IS BASED ON... UM... WOW.
WHO HERE WEIGHS 250 KILOS AND WALKS LIKE AN INEBRIATED BAG OF BUNGEE CORDS?
Bipeds make this look so easy.


75,000 LIGHT YEARS AWAY ABOARD THE FREE GUNSHIP BRISTLECONE
THAT MOVIE WAS STUPID


HOW CAN YOU TELL? YOU WERE TALKING THROUGH THE WHOLE THING.
I WASN'T TALKING. I WAS COMPLAINING.
WE PICKED AN ACTION MOVIE THIS TIME SO YOU WOULDN'T COMPLAIN.

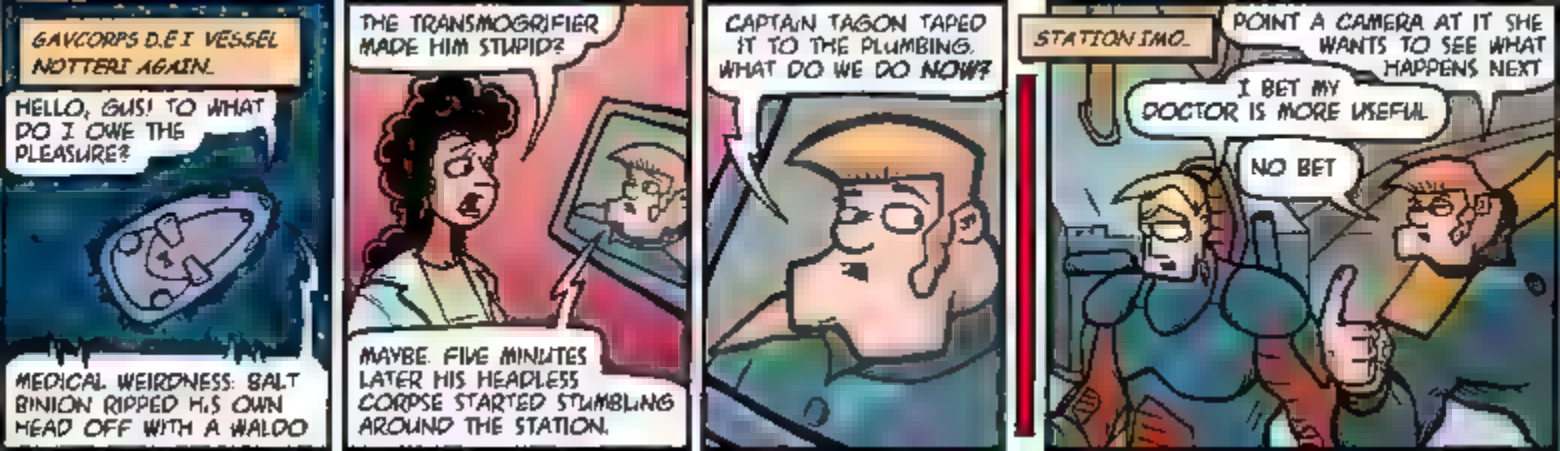

WELL, YOU SHOULD'VE PICKED ONE THAT WASN'T STUPID. DID YOU SEE SERGEANT HATCHETT'S PISTOLS?
OH, NOT THIS AGAIN.
THE GG-130 CAN'T HAVE CUSTOM GRIPS AND A PALM LOCK.
THAT'S JUST AN ENGINEERING PROBLEM. HATCHETT COULD HAVE HAD HIS PISTOLS CUSTOM-MADE.
ON A COP'S SALARY? NO WAY
LOOK, THE STORY REQUIRED HIM TO HAVE WHITE GOLD PISTOL GRIPS. OTHERWISE HIS BULLETS WOULDN'T HAVE HURT THE GHOSTS. THEY EXPLAINED THAT

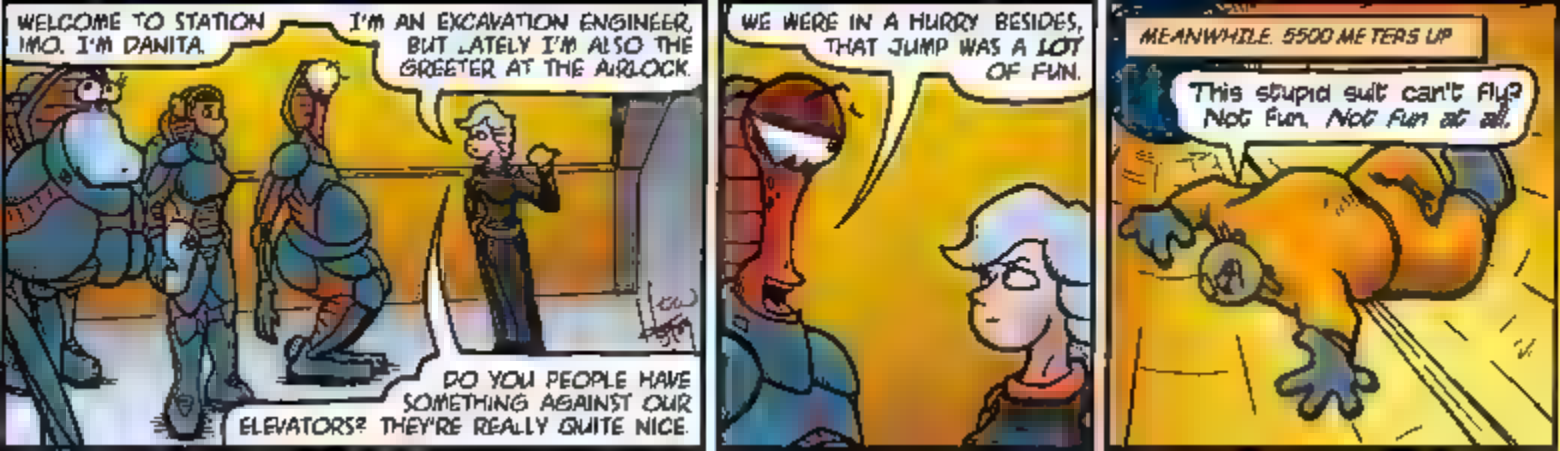

BUT THEY DIDN'T EXPLAIN HOW HE GOT WHITE GOLD GRIPS AND A PALM LOCK ONTO A POLICE-ISSUE GG-130
SO.. YOU'LL LET THEM MAKE UP RULES ABOUT GHOSTS, BUT THEY CAN'T MAKE UP RULES ABOUT CUSTOM PISTOLS?
THEY CAN'T MAKE UP RULES ABOUT CUSTOM PISTOLS BECAUSE I ALREADY KNOW THOSE RULES.
WAIT.. ARE YOU SAYING THEY MADE UP ALL THAT STUFF ABOUT THE GHOSTS?
FOR JUST A MOMENT THERE I THOUGHT YOU HAD A CAREER AS A FILM CRITIC AHEAD OF YOU.

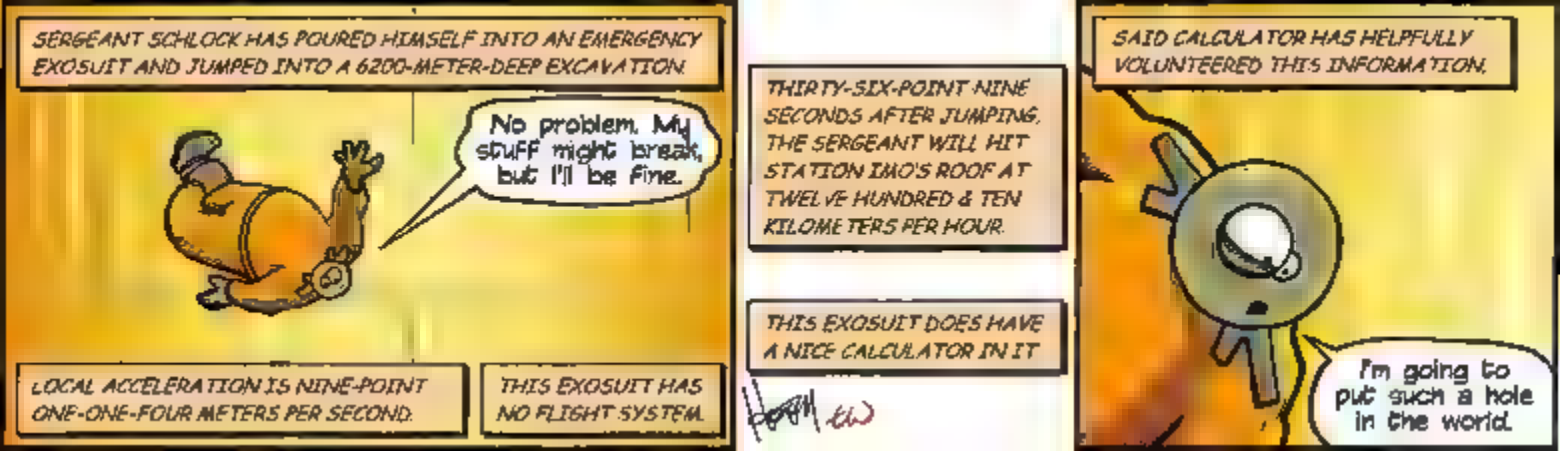

YOU TWO ARGUE LIKE YOU'RE MARRIED GIVE IT A REST, OR GET A ROOM.
I CAN DO WITHOUT THE DIRTY LOOKS, BUT THE SILENCE IS GOLDEN.

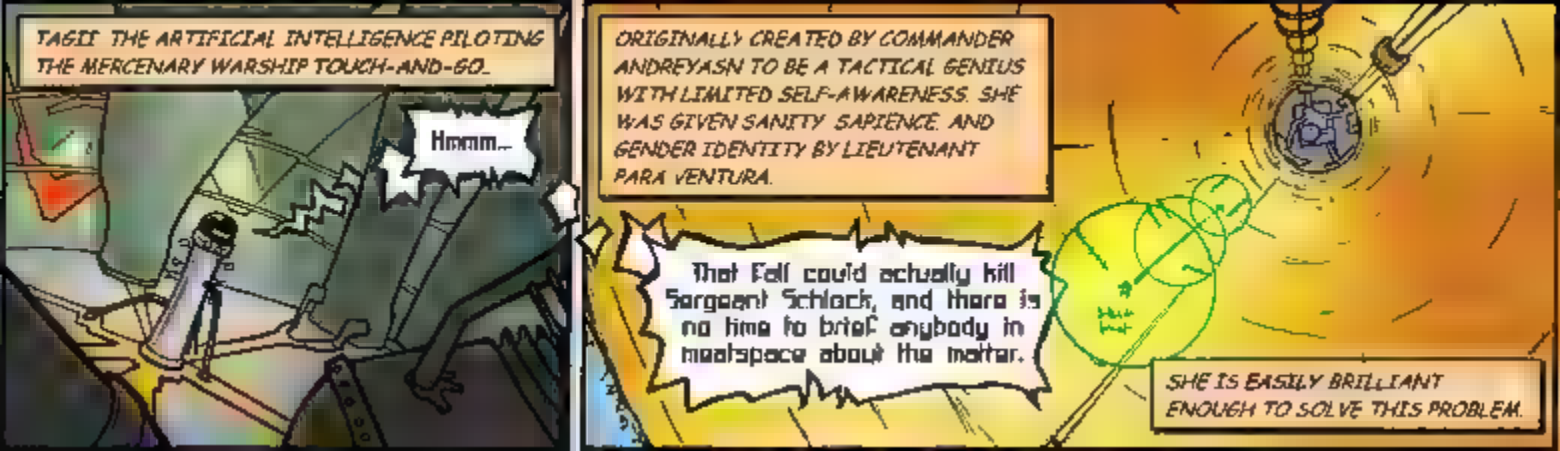

ME AND KATHRYN WENT ON A DATE ONE TIME. I THOUGHT SHE WAS HOT FOR THE CAPTAIN, BUT SHE WAS ACTUALLY A SPY
IS THERE ANY REASON SHE COULDN'T HAVE BEEN BOTH?
I DON'T THINK THAT WAS NICK'S POINT, GENERAL.
HANG HIS POINT I WANT GRANDCHILDREN BEFORE THE KNEES I'M DANDLING 'EM ON ARE REPLACEMENTS.

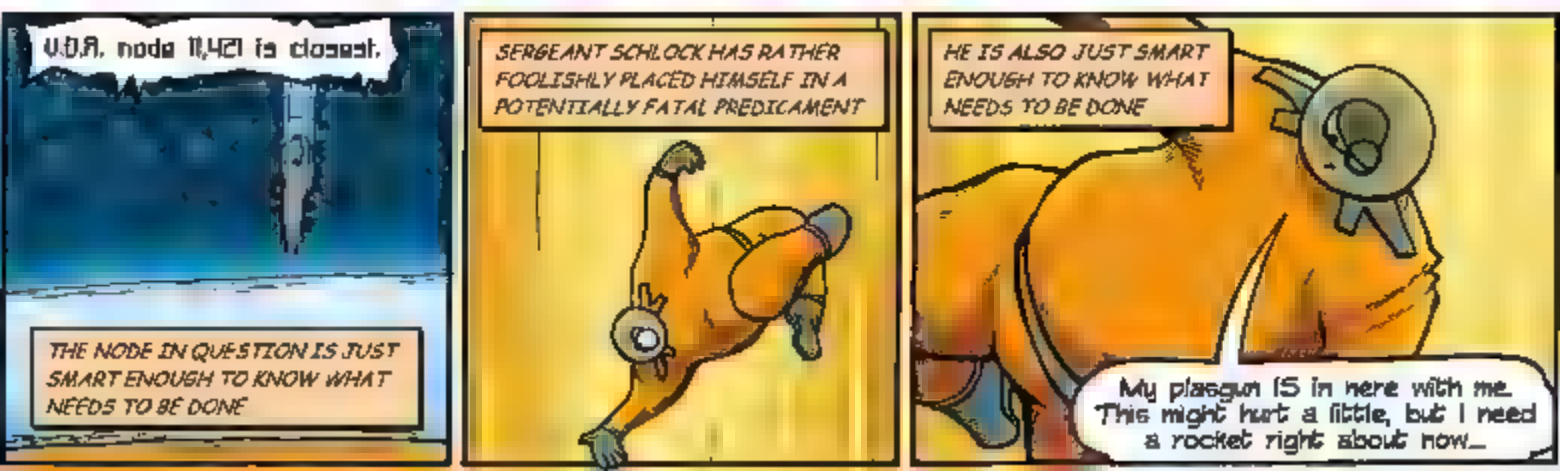

SO INSTEAD OF NAGGING YOUR SON ABOUT PRODUCING GRANDCHILDREN, YOU NAG WOMEN WHO MIGHT OR MIGHT NOT BE REMOTELY INTERESTED IN HIM?
THIS IS A NEW TACTIC. I GUESS I DO BOTH.
FOR AS STUPID AS YOUR SELFISH DNA IS, I'M SURPRISED YOU WERE ABLE TO REPRODUCE AT ALL.
THE BOY'S MOTHER USED TO SAY THE SAME THING.

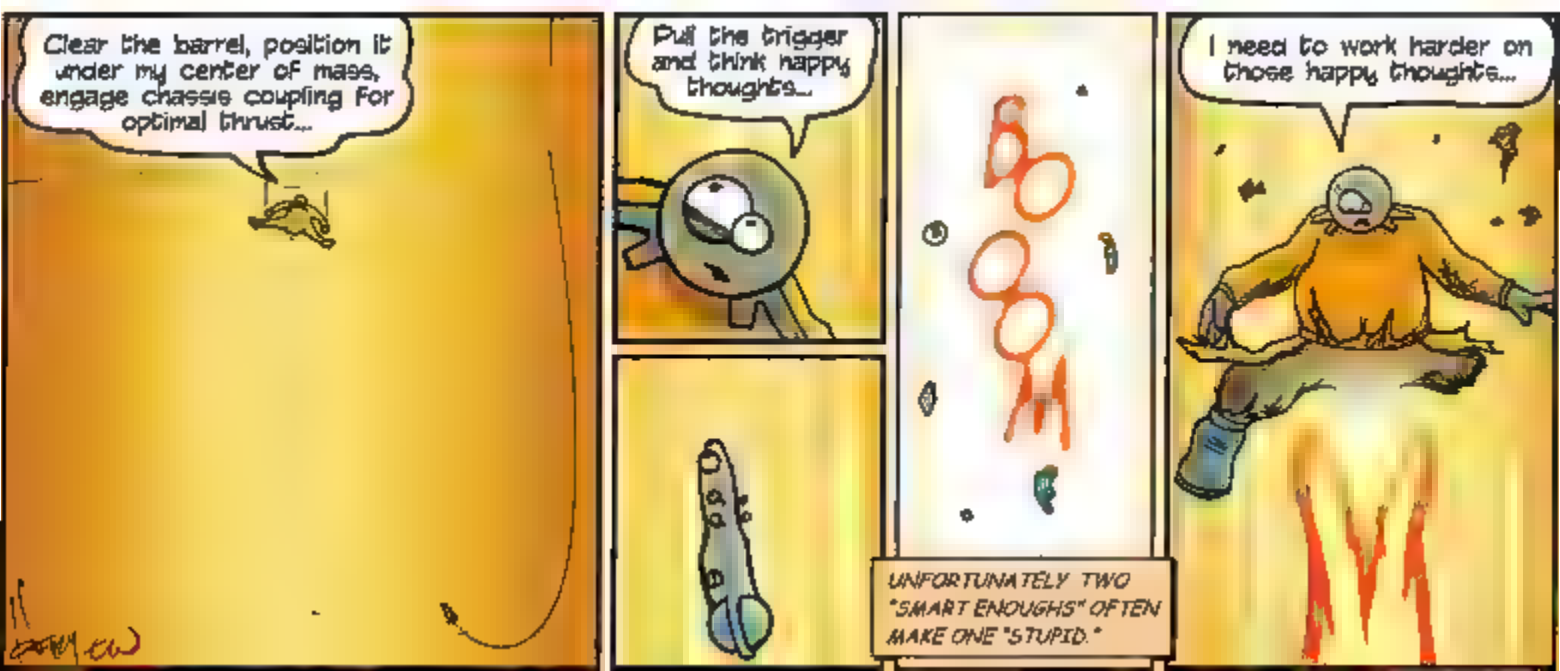

GAVCORPS D.E.I VESSEL NOTTERI AGAIN.
HELLO, GUS! TO WHAT DO I OWE THE PLEASURE?
MEDICAL WEIRDNESS: BALT BINION RIPPED HIS OWN HEAD OFF WITH A WALDO
THE TRANSMOGRIFIER MADE HIM STUPID?
MAYBE. FIVE MINUTES LATER HIS HEADLESS CORPSE STARTED STUMBLING AROUND THE STATION.
CAPTAIN TAGON TAPED IT TO THE PLUMBING. WHAT DO WE DO NOW?
STATION IMO.
POINT A CAMERA AT IT SHE WANTS TO SEE WHAT HAPPENS NEXT
I BET MY DOCTOR IS MORE USEFUL
NO BET

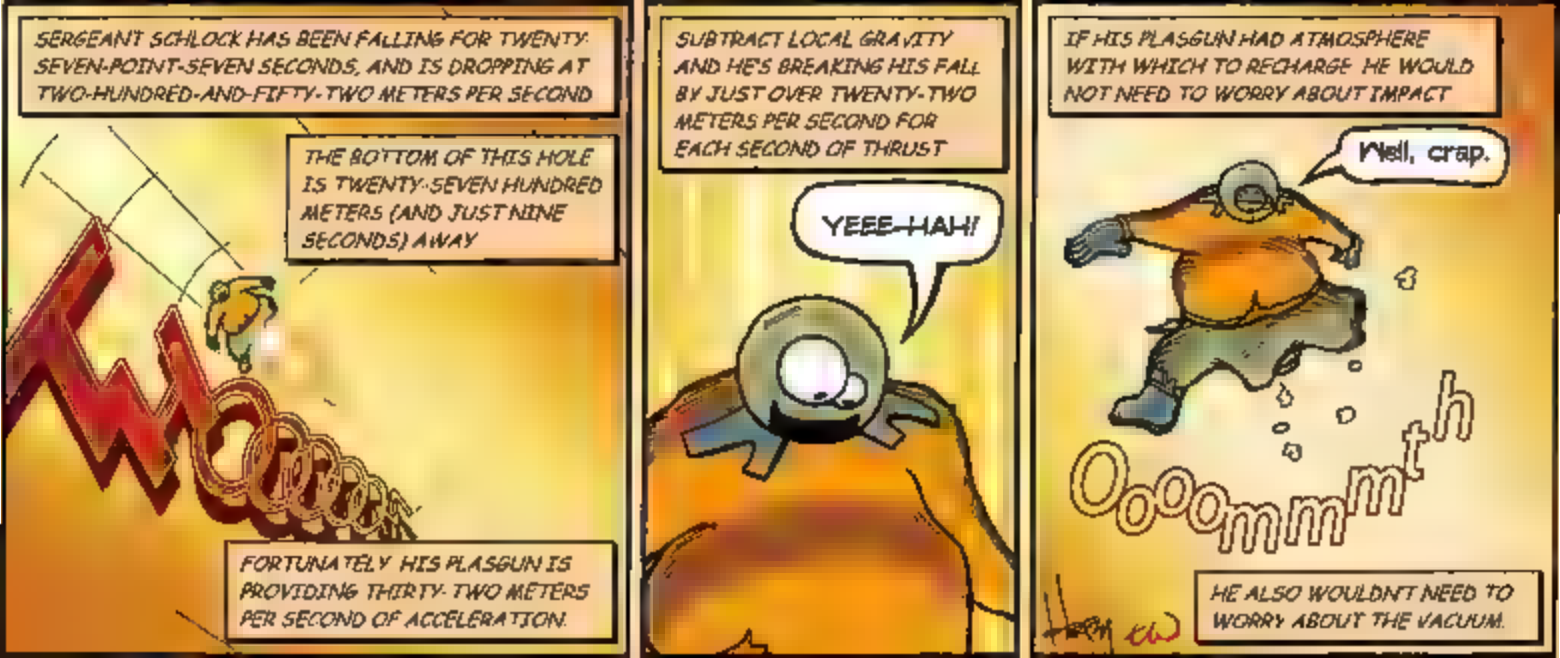

WELCOME TO STATION IMO. I'M DANITA.
I'M AN EXCAVATION ENGINEER, BUT LATELY I'M ALSO THE GREETER AT THE AIRLOCK.
DO YOU PEOPLE HAVE SOMETHING AGAINST OUR ELEVATORS? THEY'RE REALLY QUITE NICE.
WE WERE IN A HURRY BESIDES, THAT JUMP WAS A LOT OF FUN.
MEANWHILE. 5500 METERS UP
This stupid suit can't fly? Not fun. Not fun at all.

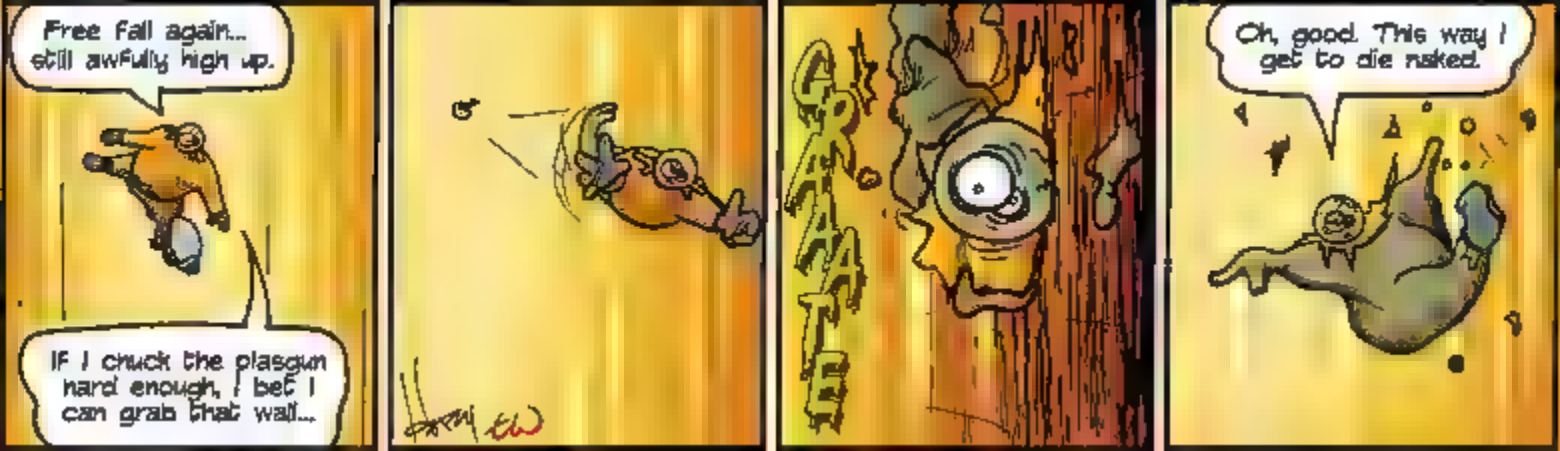

SERGEANT SCHLOCK HAS POURED HIMSELF INTO AN EMERGENCY EXOSUIT AND JUMPED INTO A 6200-METER-DEEP EXCAVATION.
No problem. My stuff might break, but I'll be fine.
LOCAL ACCELERATION IS NINE-POINT ONE-ONE-FOUR METERS PER SECOND.
THIS EXOSUIT HAS NO FLIGHT SYSTEM.
THIRTY-SIX-POINT NINE SECONDS AFTER JUMPING, THE SERGEANT WILL HIT STATION IMO'S ROOF AT TWELVE HUNDRED & TEN KILOMETERS PER HOUR.
THIS EXOSUIT DOES HAVE A NICE CALCULATOR IN IT
SAID CALCULATOR HAS HELPFULLY VOLUNTEERED THIS INFORMATION.
I'm going to put such a hole in the world.

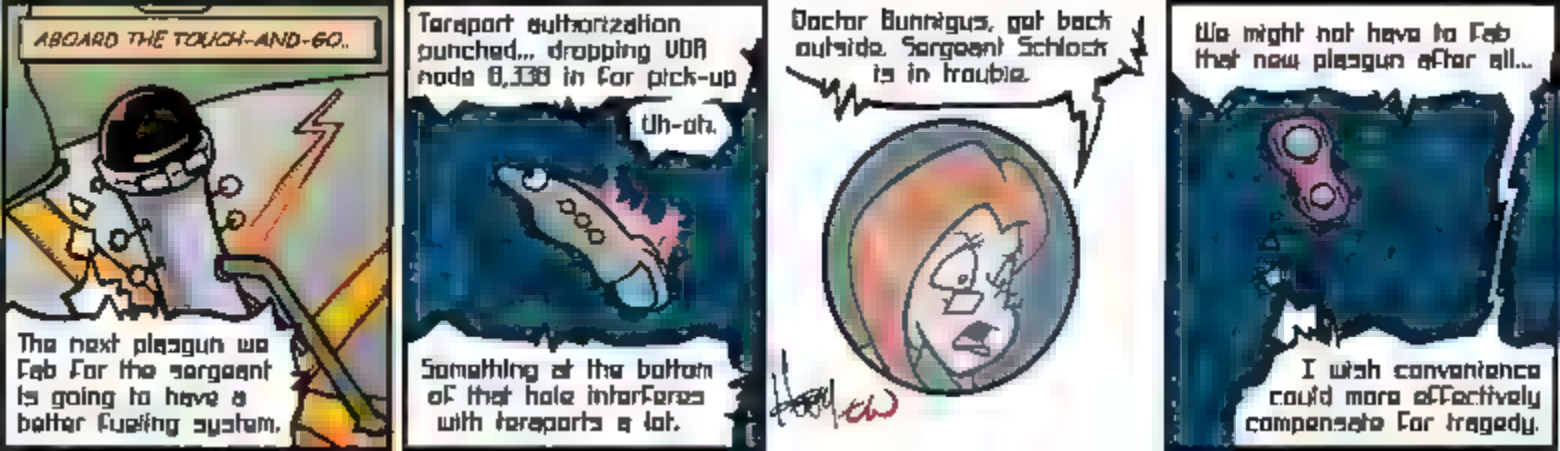

TAGIT THE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE PILOTING THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO.
Hmmm...
ORIGINALLY CREATED BY COMMANDER ANDREYASN TO BE A TACTICAL GENIUS WITH LIMITED SELF-AWARENESS. SHE WAS GIVEN SANITY SAPIENCE AND GENDER IDENTITY BY LIEUTENANT PARA VENTURA.
That Fall could actually kill Sergeant Schlock, and there is no time to brief anybody in meatspace about the matter.
SHE IS EASILY BRILLIANT ENOUGH TO SOLVE THIS PROBLEM.

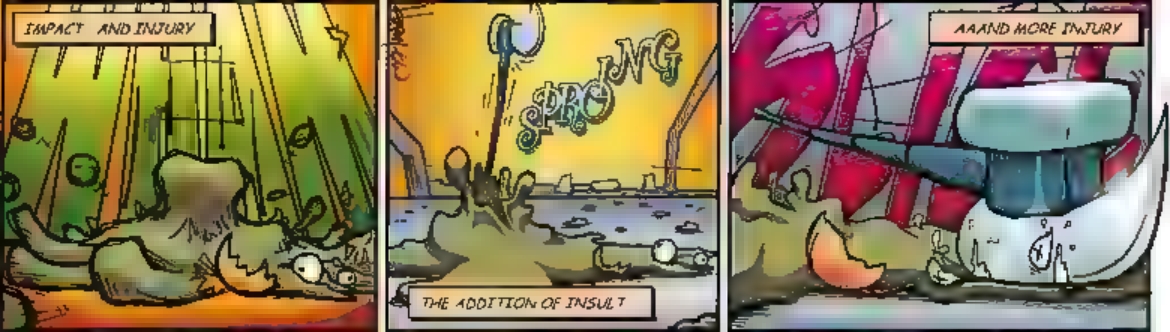

V.O.R. node 11,421 is closest.
THE NODE IN QUESTION IS JUST SMART ENOUGH TO KNOW WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE
SERGEANT SCHLOCK HAS RATHER FOOLISHLY PLACED HIMSELF IN A POTENTIALLY FATAL PREDICAMENT
HE IS ALSO JUST SMART ENOUGH TO KNOW WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE
My plasgun IS in here with me. This might hurt a little, but I need a rocket right about now...

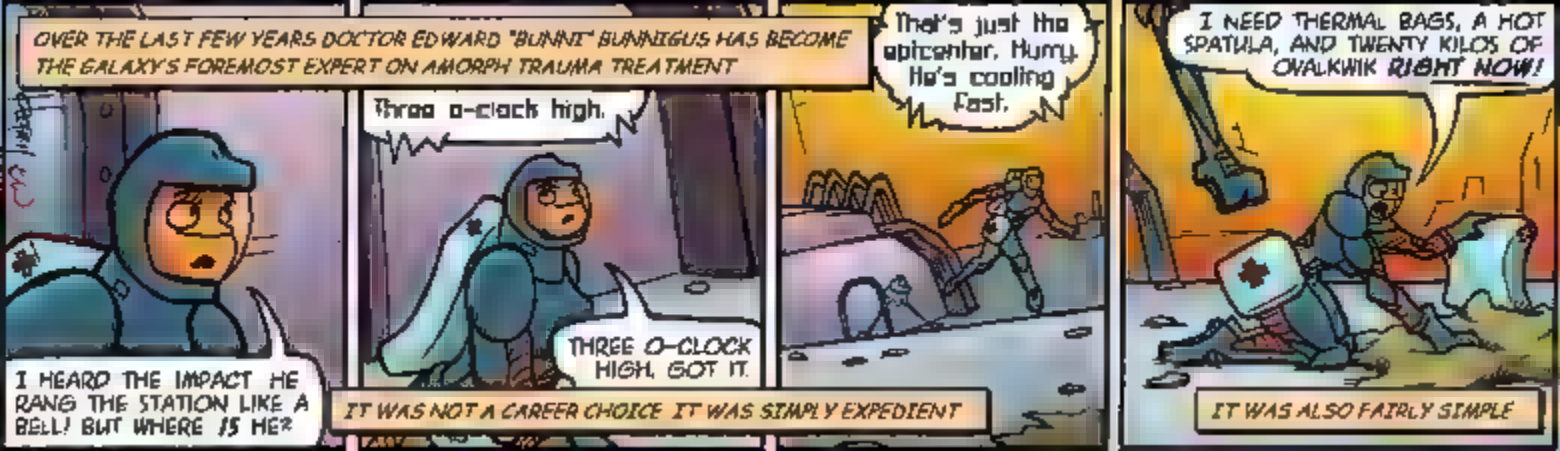

Clear the barrel, position it under my center of mass, engage chassis coupling for optimal thrust...
Pull the trigger and think happy thoughts...
BOOM
I need to work harder on those happy thoughts...
UNFORTUNATELY TWO "SMART ENOUGHS" OFTEN MAKE ONE "STUPID."

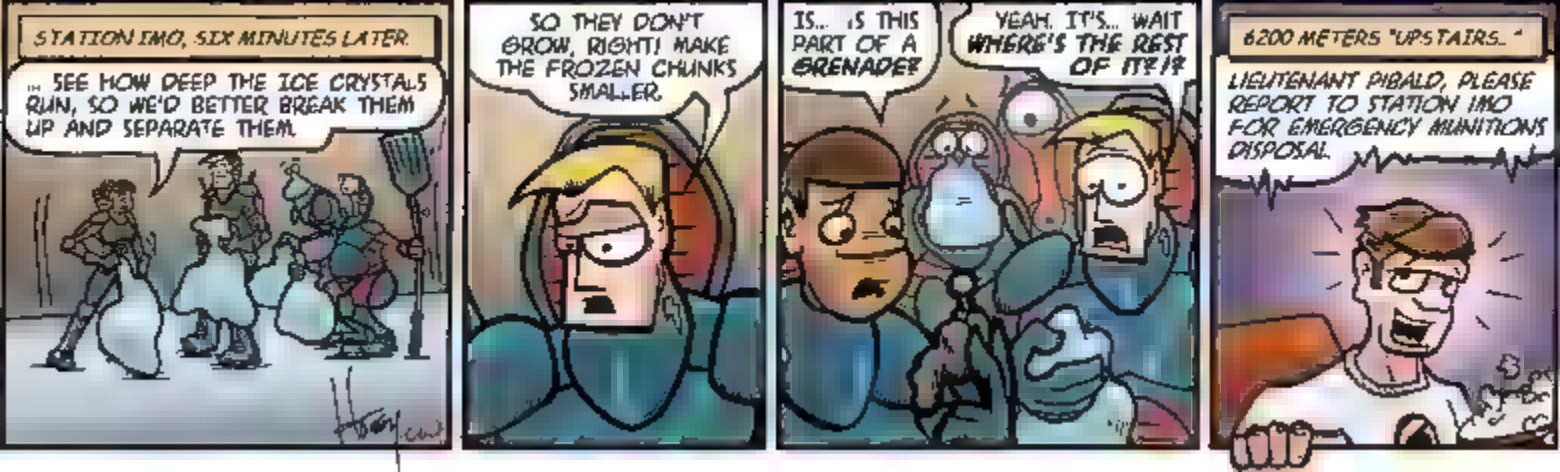

SERGEANT SCHLOCK HAS BEEN FALLING FOR TWENTY-SEVEN-POINT-SEVEN SECONDS, AND IS DROPPING AT TWO-HUNDRED-AND-FIFTY-TWO METERS PER SECOND
THE BOTTOM OF THIS HOLE IS TWENTY-SEVEN HUNDRED METERS (AND JUST NINE SECONDS) AWAY
Whoooo
FORTUNATELY HIS PLASGUN IS PROVIDING THIRTY-TWO METERS PER SECOND OF ACCELERATION.
SUBTRACT LOCAL GRAVITY AND HE'S BREAKING HIS FALL BY JUST OVER TWENTY-TWO METERS PER SECOND FOR EACH SECOND OF THRUST
YEEE-HAH!
IF HIS PLASGUN HAD ATMOSPHERE WITH WHICH TO RECHARGE HE WOULD NOT NEED TO WORRY ABOUT IMPACT
Well, crap.
Oooommmmth
HE ALSO WOULDN'T NEED TO WORRY ABOUT THE VACUUM.


Free fall again... still awfully high up.
IF I chuck the plasgun hard enough, I bet I can grab that wall...
GRAAATE
Oh, good. This way I get to die naked.


ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO..
The next plasgun we fab for the sergeant is going to have a better fueling system.
Teraport authorization punched... dropping VDA node 8,338 in for pick-up
Uh-oh.
Something at the bottom of that hole interferes with teraports a lot.
Doctor Bunnigus, get back outside. Sergeant Schlock is in trouble.
We might not have to fab that new plasgun after all...
I wish convenience could more effectively compensate for tragedy.

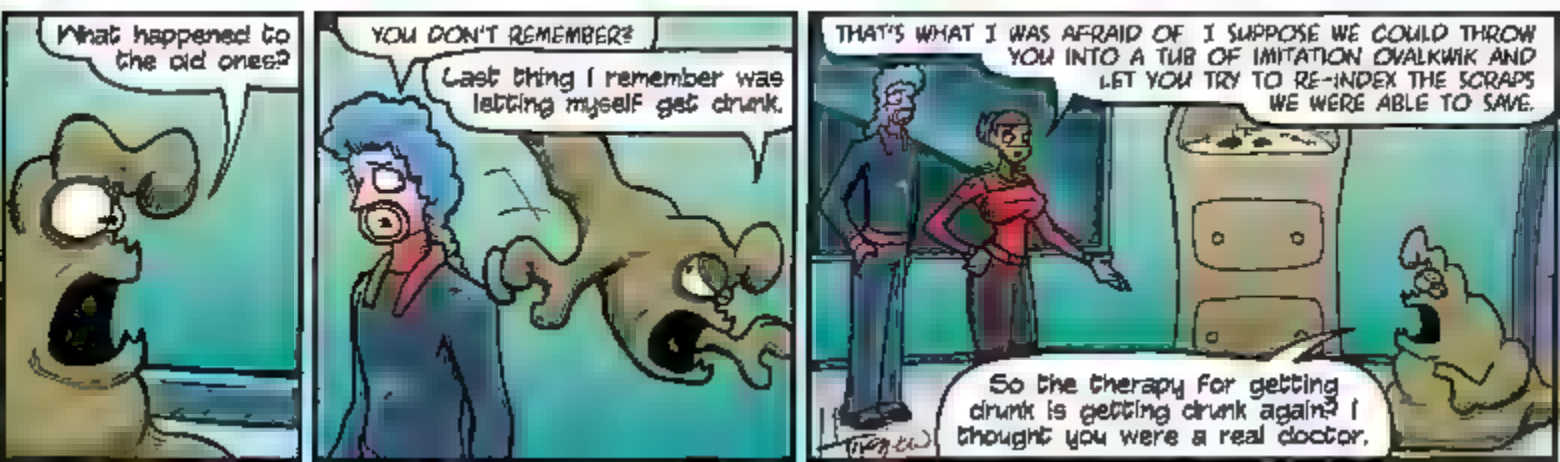

IMPACT AND INJURY
SPRONG
THE ADDITION OF INSULT
AAAND MORE INJURY


OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS DOCTOR EDWARD "BUNNI" BUNNIGUS HAS BECOME THE GALAXY'S FOREMOST EXPERT ON AMORPH TRAUMA TREATMENT
I HEARD THE IMPACT. HE RANG THE STATION LIKE A BELL! BUT WHERE IS HE?
Three o-clock high.
THREE O-CLOCK HIGH. GOT IT.
IT WAS NOT A CAREER CHOICE. IT WAS SIMPLY EXPEDIENT
That's just the epicenter, Hurry. He's cooling fast.
I NEED THERMAL BAGS, A HOT SPATULA, AND TWENTY KILOS OF OVALKWIK RIGHT NOW!
IT WAS ALSO FAIRLY SIMPLE


STATION IMO, SIX MINUTES LATER.
... SEE HOW DEEP THE ICE CRYSTALS RUN, SO WE'D BETTER BREAK THEM UP AND SEPARATE THEM.
SO THEY DON'T GROW, RIGHT! MAKE THE FROZEN CHUNKS SMALLER.
IS... IS THIS PART OF A GRENADE?
YEAH. IT'S... WAIT WHERE'S THE REST OF IT?!
6200 METERS "UPSTAIRS."
LIEUTENANT PIBALD, PLEASE REPORT TO STATION IMO FOR EMERGENCY MUNITIONS DISPOSAL.


..ISTING! THEY'RE TWISTING! DOC! IT'S STARTING!
CONFIRMED! I'M SEEING ENZYME PRODUCTION AND ION TRANSFER UP AND DOWN THE NEW FULLERENE MATRICES. HE'S DOING IT HIMSELF NOW.
LOOK AT MONITOR SIX! WE'VE GOT TENDRIL ACTIVITY BEHIND THE NEW EYES!
SERGEANT! ARE YOU IN THERE?
Gavs What did you do to your... urgh, hang on.


NOW LOOK AT MONITOR SIX! THIS IS AMAZING!
Your hair's s'posed to be blue, right?
I GET IT COLOR CALIBRATION! YOU'RE DOING THE ICC'S JOB ON THE FLY!
What icy sea? Where am I?
SORRY ANCIENT HISTORY WELCOME BACK! I BROUGHT YOU SOME NEW EYES.


What happened to the old ones?
YOU DON'T REMEMBER?
Last thing I remember was letting myself get drunk.
THAT'S WHAT I WAS AFRAID OF. I SUPPOSE WE COULD THROW YOU INTO A TUB OF IMITATION OVALKWIK AND LET YOU TRY TO RE-INDEX THE SCRAPS WE WERE ABLE TO SAVE.
So the therapy for getting drunk is getting drunk again? I thought you were a real doctor.

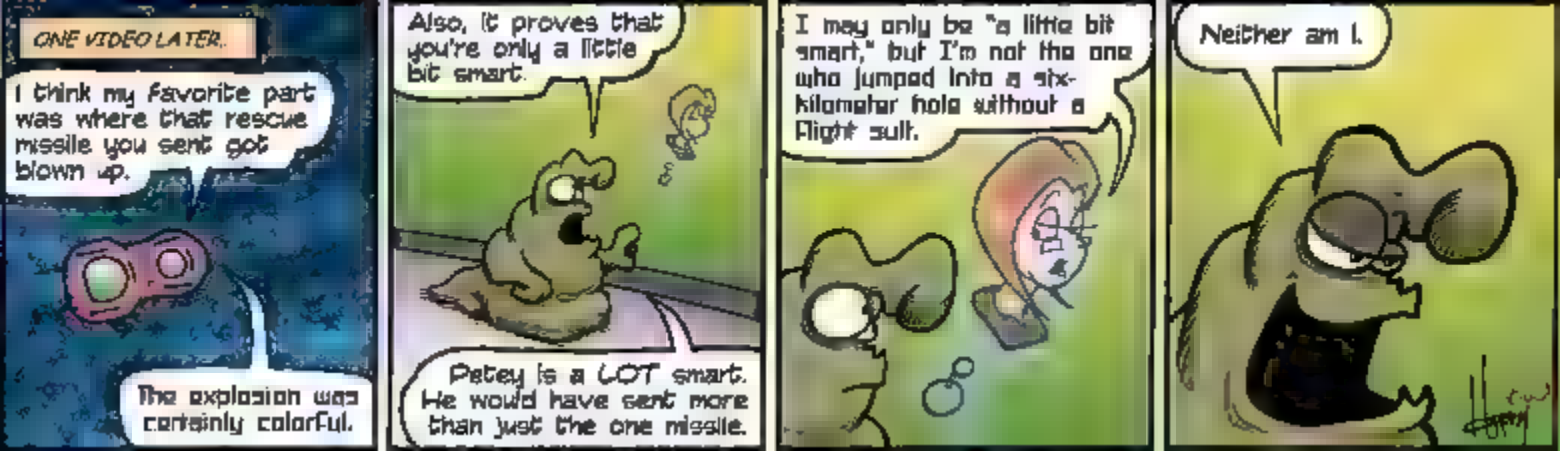

We're on the Touch-and-Go, right?
YUP.
So the refit got done while I was out. Wow.
A new tub? You guys got me a new tub!
CALL IT A BIRTHDAY PRESENT.
Okay, but I don't think we know when my actual birthday is.
WE DO NOW.


The new digs are nice, but what's with the tree? I'm horrible with houseplants.
I mean, unless they're tasty, and then I'm only good with 'em for a few minutes.
YOU'RE GOING TO WANT TO LEARN A NEW SKILL THEN.
WITH THE RIGHT FERTILIZER, THE NEXT TIME YOU LOSE AN EYE YOU CAN PICK A NEW ONE

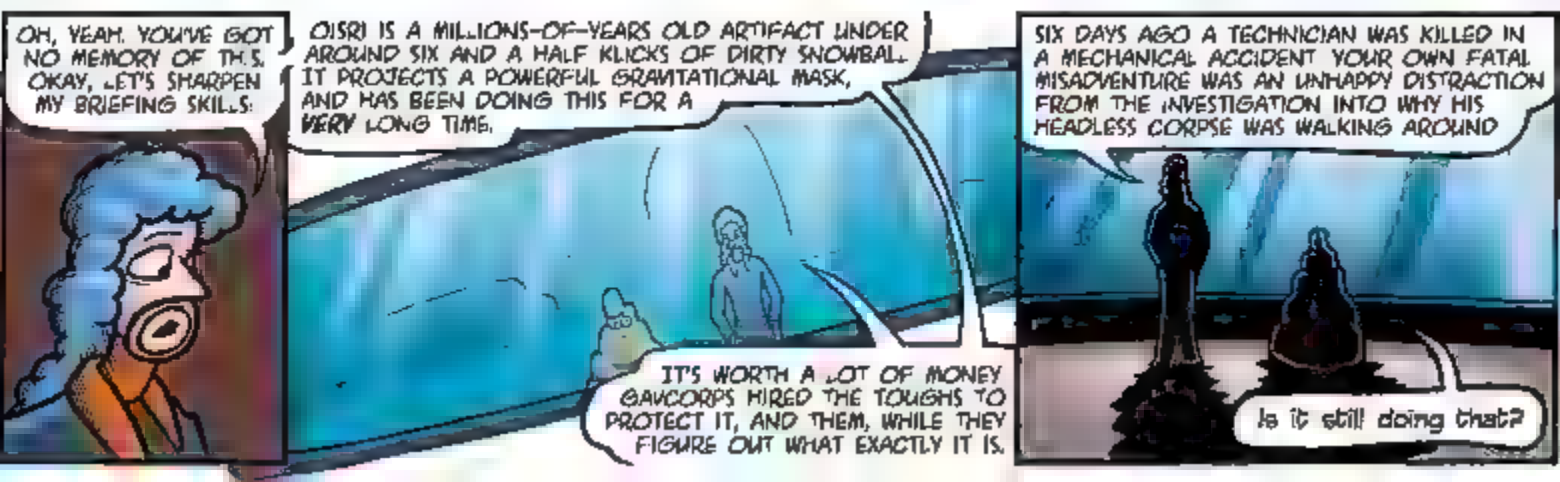

AFTER YOUR ACCIDENT YOUR DOCTOR CALLED PETEY, WHO THEN ASKED ME TO RUN TO SHANJ-RHO TO PICK UP AN EYE TREE FOR YOU.
THIS ONE WAS ORIGINALLY PLANTED ON SACRED GROUND UNFORTUNATELY, IT WAS SO SACRED THE TREE WASN'T GROWING WELL.
WHEN I TOLD THE AMORPHS WHO THE TREE WAS FOR THEY GOT ALL EXCITED, GAVE ME A BIG DISCOUNT AND SAID THE TREE IS "HOBBES."
Do you ambassador types get sent on shopping trips often?
WE PREFER TO CALL IT A "COURIER SERVICE." EVEN IF TREES ARE A BIT BIG FOR THE DIPLOMATIC POUCH.


HE'S NOT GETTING ANYTHING BACK. NOTHING WE SCRAPED UP WAS VIABLE. IT ALL GOT TOO COLD
I HAD TO PULL YOU BACK. I COULDN'T LET YOU KEEP DIGGING AROUND WITH LIVE GRENADES HIDING AMONG HIS... BITS.
YOU COULDN'T HAVE SAVED MUCH OF HIM, BUT I KNEW I COULD SAVE ALL OF YOU.
I KNOW.
NOW IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME, I'M GOING TO GO CRY ABOUT IT UNTIL I BELIEVE


Tagii? How long was I out?
It has been six days since you lost your eyes.
I was completely dead, wasn't I?
Yes.
That's pretty cool.
You should see the video.

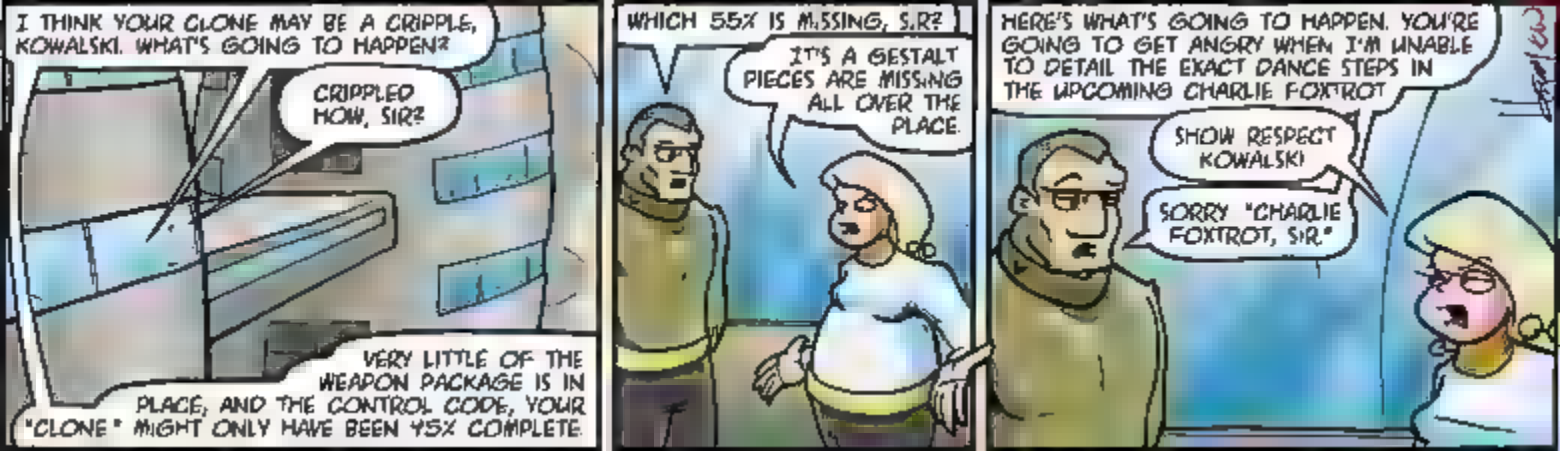

ONE VIDEO LATER...
I think my favorite part was where that rescue missile you sent got blown up.
The explosion was certainly colorful.
Also, it proves that you're only a little bit smart.
Petey is a LOT smart. He would have sent more than just the one missile.
I may only be "a little bit smart," but I'm not the one who jumped into a six-kilometer hole without a flight suit.
Neither am I.


ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO IN CLOSE PATROL AROUND OISRI
You're still here, ambassador?
I'M HERE FOR THE DURATION, IT WOULD SEEM.
Oh. Sorry to drag you out here, then.
IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT. THEY WERE ABOUT TO ROTATE ME AWAY FROM THE PARNASSUS DOM EMBASSY ANYWAY.
GAVCORPS WANTS A "BASELINER" HERE AS A LIAISON. WHEN I SHOWED UP WITH YOUR TREE, THEY INVITED ME TO STAY
WAIT... I GUESS IT IS YOUR FAULT. APOLOGY ACCEPTED.
So, where is 'here,' exactly? What's going on?


OH, YEAH. YOU'VE GOT NO MEMORY OF THIS. OKAY, LET'S SHARPEN MY BRIEFING SKILLS.
OISRI IS A MILLIONS-OF-YEARS OLD ARTIFACT UNDER AROUND SIX AND A HALF KLICKS OF DIRTY SNOWBALL. IT PROJECTS A POWERFUL GRAVITATIONAL MASK, AND HAS BEEN DOING THIS FOR A VERY LONG TIME.
IT'S WORTH A LOT OF MONEY GAVCORPS HIRED THE TOUGHS TO PROTECT IT, AND THEM, WHILE THEY FIGURE OUT WHAT EXACTLY IT IS.
SIX DAYS AGO A TECHNICIAN WAS KILLED IN A MECHANICAL ACCIDENT. YOUR OWN FATAL MISADVENTURE WAS AN UNHAPPY DISTRACTION FROM THE INVESTIGATION INTO WHY HIS HEADLESS CORPSE WAS WALKING AROUND
Is it still doing that?


HE'S STILL WALKING AROUND, YES, BUT HIS HEAD GREW BACK SO I'VE BEEN TOLD HE'S NOT NEARLY AS INTERESTING TO WATCH.
YOUR DOCTOR HAS BEEN LOGGING TWENTY-HOUR DAYS ALTERNATING BETWEEN RESUSCITATION EFFORTS ON YOU, AND AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE VERY NIFTY BLOOD NANNIES THE TRANSMOGRIFIED GAVS HERE HAVE
THE RESEARCH HERE IS A MAD SCRAMBLE. FOUR DAYS AGO THE DIG GOT TO THE ARTIFACT'S SURFACE. NOBODY KNOWS WHAT'S INSIDE YET.
That's too bad.
DON'T WORRY. I'M SURE THEY'LL FIGURE IT OUT
No, it's too bad I missed the zombie.


ABOARD THE U.N.S. BATTLEPLATE MOROKWENG, SOL SYSTEM.
KOWALSKI! A WORD, PLEASE?
YES SIR.
MONITORS ON OISR1 INDICATE THAT YOUR PORTION OF THE REDHACK PACKAGE HAS ACTIVATED
OORAH, SIR. THAT BASE SHOULD BE YOURS SHORTLY
REALLY? BECAUSE ONLY YOUR PORTION OF THE PACKAGE IS ACTIVE AND APPARENTLY THAT PORTION HASN'T COMPLETELY LOADED
ANY CLONE OF MINE CAN TAKE THAT BASE WITH ONE HAND TIED BEHIND HIS BACK, EVEN IF THE ONLY THING HE'S GOT IN HIS OTHER HAND IS HIS
THANK YOU FOR REMINDING ME HOW COCKY YOU ARE.

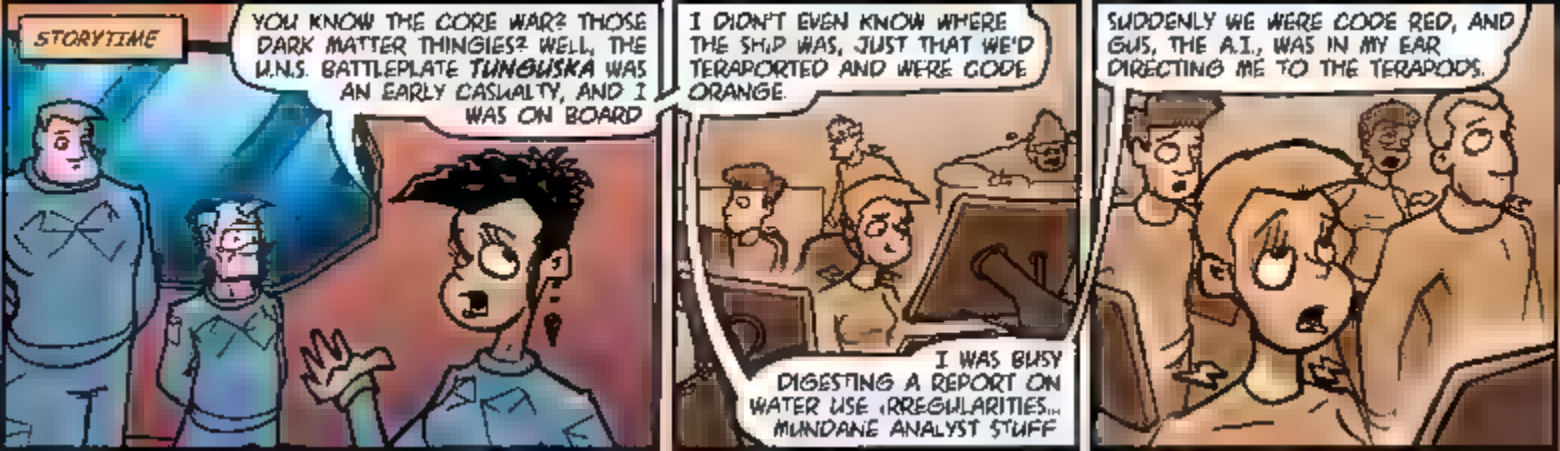

I THINK YOUR CLONE MAY BE A CRIPPLE, KOWALSKI. WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN?
CRIPPLED HOW, SIR?
VERY LITTLE OF THE WEAPON PACKAGE IS IN PLACE, AND THE CONTROL CODE, YOUR "CLONE" MIGHT ONLY HAVE BEEN 45% COMPLETE.
WHICH 55% IS MISSING, SIR?
IT'S A GESTALT PIECES ARE MISSING ALL OVER THE PLACE.
HERE'S WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN. YOU'RE GOING TO GET ANGRY WHEN I'M UNABLE TO DETAIL THE EXACT DANCE STEPS IN THE UPCOMING CHARLIE FOXTROT
SHOW RESPECT KOWALSKI
SORRY "CHARLIE FOXTROT, SIR."

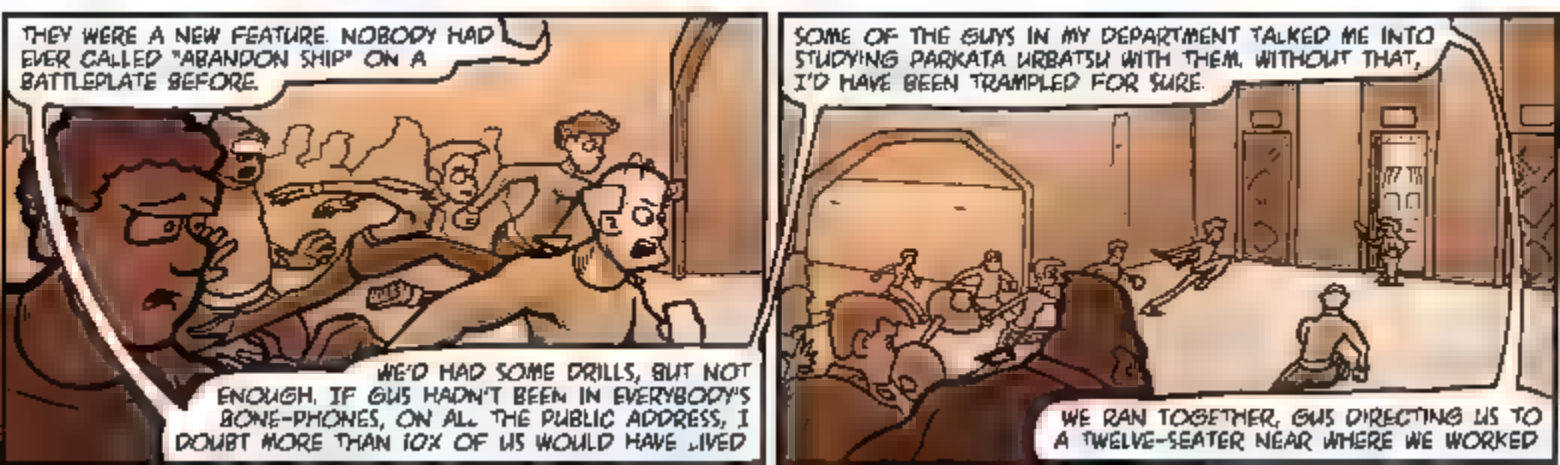

THERE'S NO TELLING HOW THIS IS GONNA SHAKE OUT, SIR. NO TELLING
MY ADVICE? ACCEPT THAT PLAN "A" IS TANGO UNIFORM, SAY INSPIRING WORDS AT THE FUNERAL, AND ROLL PLAN "B."
PLAN "B" IS A FRONTAL ASSAULT IN WHICH WE PRAY WE STILL POSSESS OVERWHELMING FORCE.
THEN ROLL IT FAST, AND PRAY FROM THE BRIDGE OF A BATTLEPLATE.
SIR.

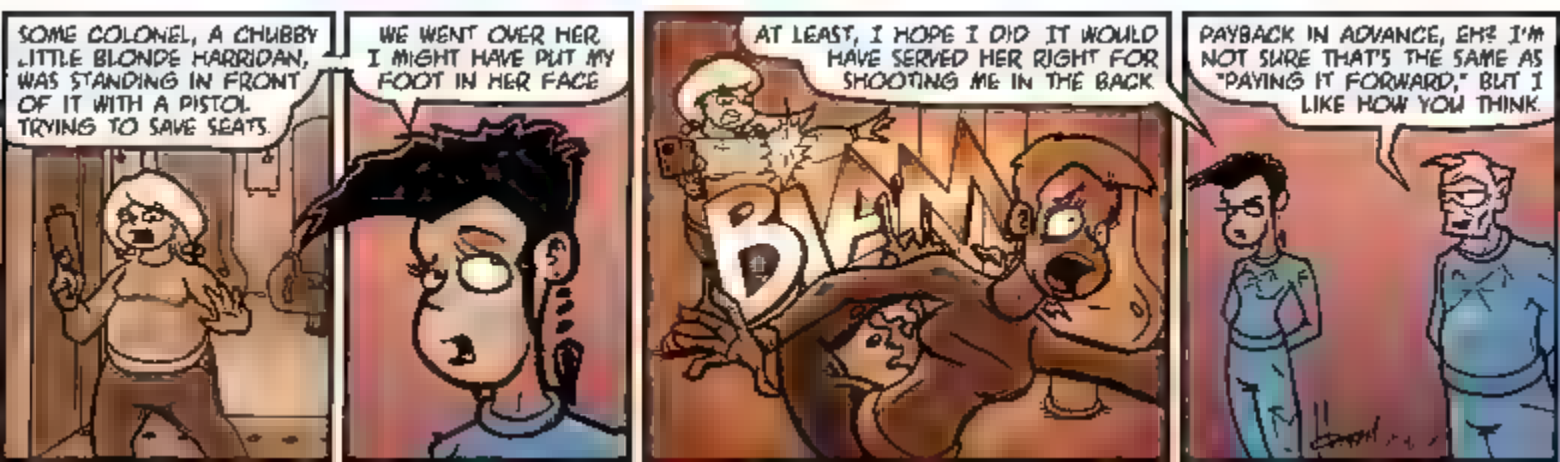

ABOARD BRISTLECONE SOL SYSTEM.
YOU DON'T USUALLY GET TO SEE THREE BATTLEPLATES AT THE SAME TIME.
UH-OH. MAYBE EARTH IS IN DANGER?
THOSE ARE TOO CLOSE TO EARTH TO DO ANY GOOD. THEY'RE FOR SHOW.
EITHER THAT OR THE FLEET IS ABOUT TO DECLARE WAR ON THE POPULATION.
YOU ANALYST TYPES ARE ALWAYS BUNDLES OF SUNSHINE, DID YOU KNOW THAT?
SUNSHINE IS JUST ANOTHER WEAPON.

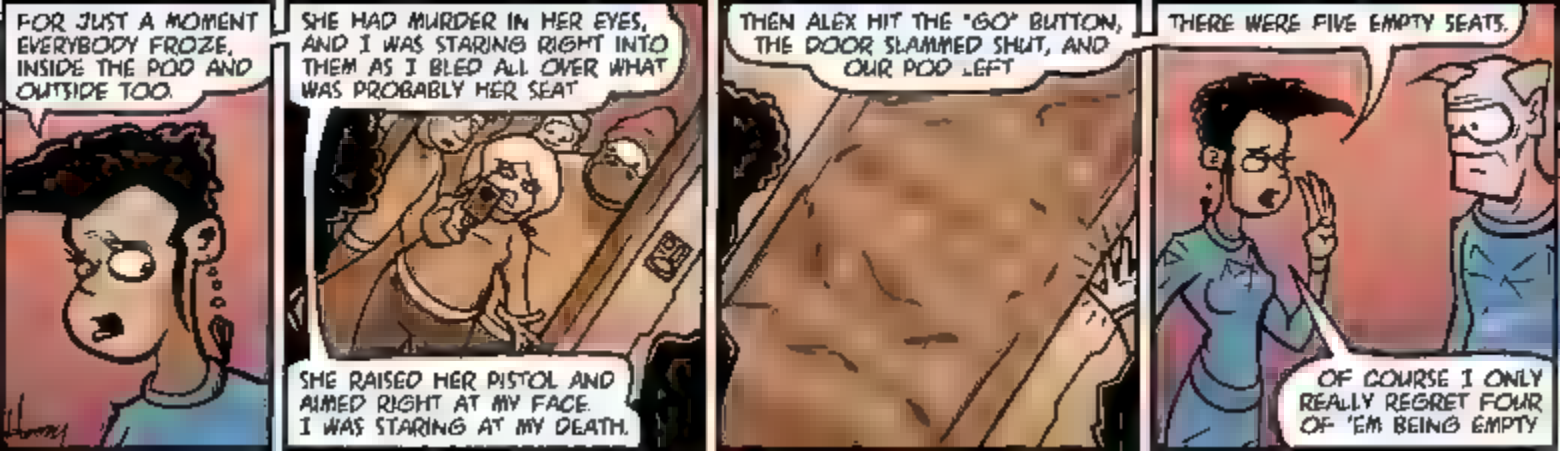

A WEEK IN TRANSIT... UGH. THIS ONLY BARELY BEATS GETTING SHOT AT
THE TERAPORT HAS MADE YOU KIDS SOFT DURING THE TERRAFORMING WAR WE GOT LOCKED IN BY THE GATEKEEPERS AND WENT THREE YEARS WITH NO SOL-SIDE RESUPPLY
DID YOU JUST PLAY THE "I WALKED UPHILL BOTH WAYS TO SCHOOL" CARD?
BLISS HIVE'S GRAVITY GENERATORS WERE FLAKY, SO THEY CYCLED 'EM MID-SHIFT. IT ACTUALLY WAS UPHILL BOTH WAYS.
UNLESS YOU WALKED IN THE SNOW, I DON'T CARE.

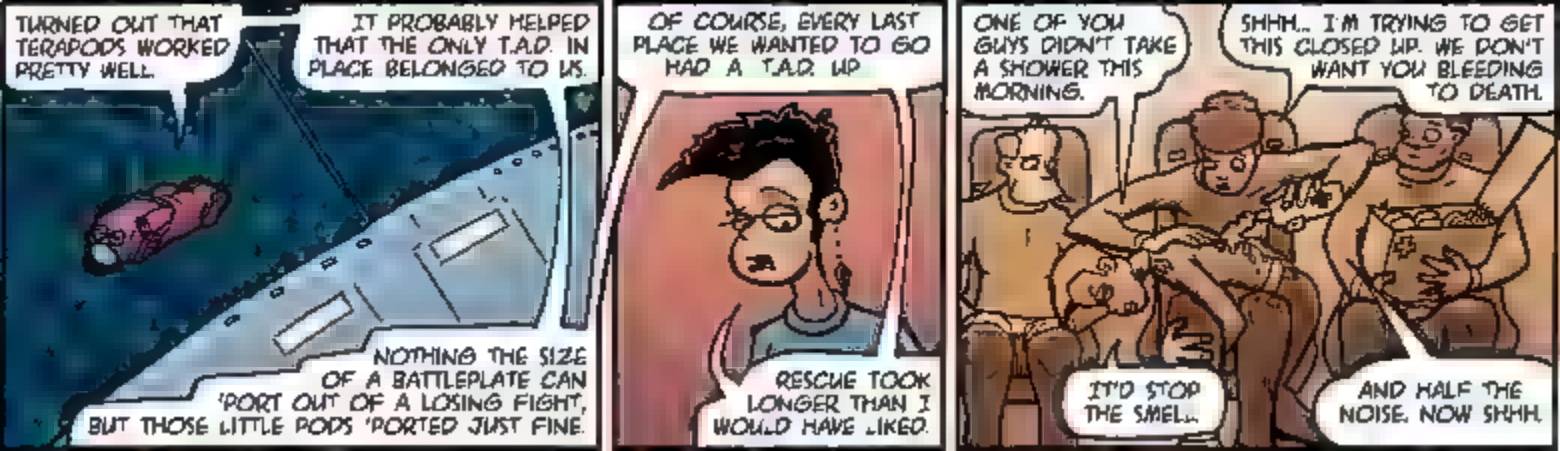

KID, I KNOW YOU THINK YOU'VE SEEN A LOT BUT I'VE FOUGHT IN WARS THAT LASTED HALF YOUR YOUNG LIFE.
I LOST HALF MY FRIENDS TO A WAR THAT'S OLDER THAN THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE.
YOU GOT QUIET DOES THAT MEAN I WIN?
NO, IT MEANS YOU HAVE TO TELL A STORY.

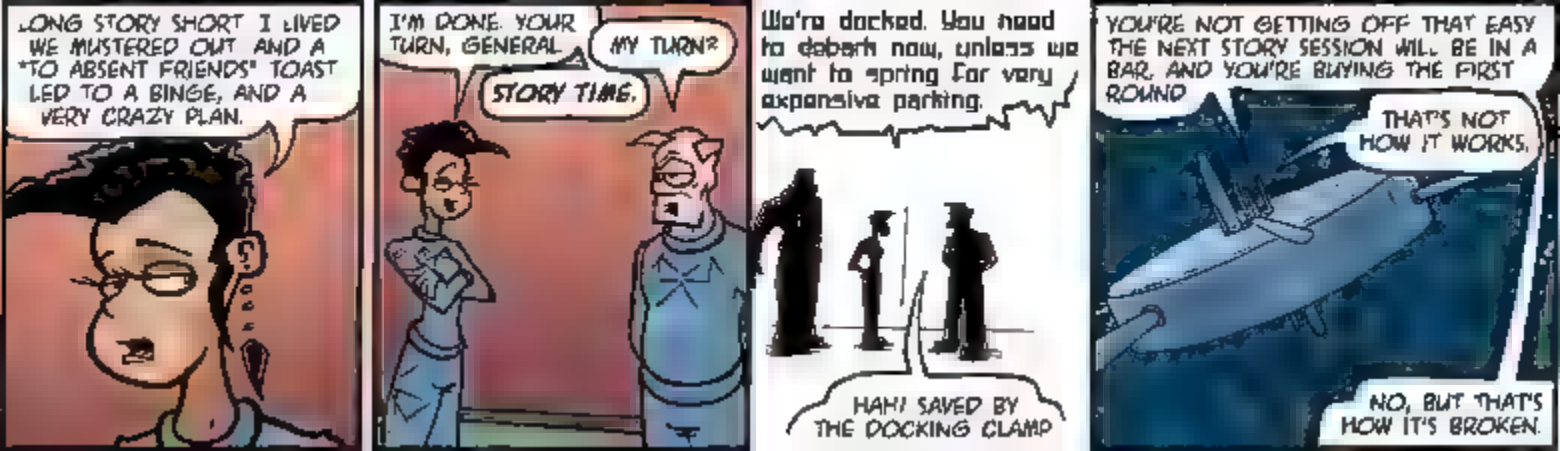

STORYTIME
YOU KNOW THE CORE WAR? THOSE DARK MATTER THINGIES? WELL, THE U.N.S. BATTLEPLATE TUNGUSKA WAS AN EARLY CASUALTY, AND I WAS ON BOARD
I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW WHERE THE SHIP WAS, JUST THAT WE'D TERAPORTED AND WERE CODE ORANGE.
I WAS BUSY DIGESTING A REPORT ON WATER USE IRREGULARITIES... MUNDANE ANALYST STUFF
SUDDENLY WE WERE CODE RED, AND GUS, THE A.I., WAS IN MY EAR DIRECTING ME TO THE TERAPODS.


THEY WERE A NEW FEATURE. NOBODY HAD EVER CALLED "ABANDON SHIP" ON A BATTLEPLATE BEFORE.
WE'D HAD SOME DRILLS, BUT NOT ENOUGH. IF GUS HADN'T BEEN IN EVERYBODY'S BONE-PHONES, ON ALL THE PUBLIC ADDRESS, I DOUBT MORE THAN 10% OF US WOULD HAVE LIVED
SOME OF THE GUYS IN MY DEPARTMENT TALKED ME INTO STUDYING PARKATA URBATSU WITH THEM. WITHOUT THAT, I'D HAVE BEEN TRAMPLED FOR SURE.
WE RAN TOGETHER, GUS DIRECTING US TO A TWELVE-SEATER NEAR WHERE WE WORKED

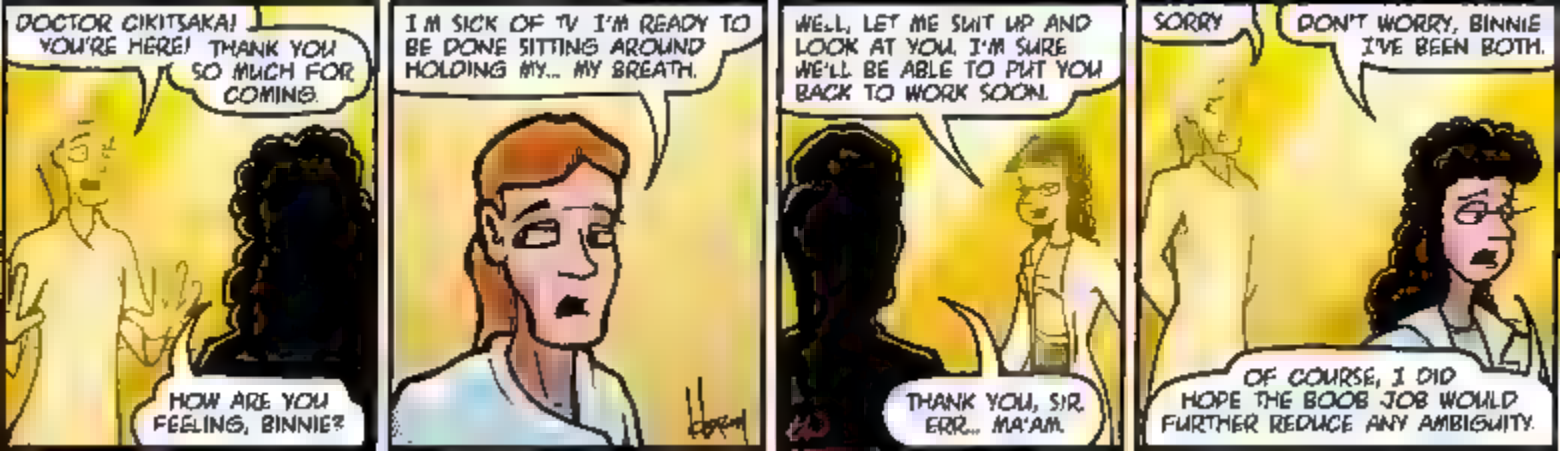

SOME COLONEL, A CHUBBY LITTLE BLONDE HARRIDAN, WAS STANDING IN FRONT OF IT WITH A PISTOL TRYING TO SAVE SEATS.
WE WENT OVER HER I MIGHT HAVE PUT MY FOOT IN HER FACE
AT LEAST, I HOPE I DID IT WOULD HAVE SERVED HER RIGHT FOR SHOOTING ME IN THE BACK.
BLAM
PAYBACK IN ADVANCE, EH? I'M NOT SURE THAT'S THE SAME AS "PAYING IT FORWARD," BUT I LIKE HOW YOU THINK.


FOR JUST A MOMENT EVERYBODY FROZE. INSIDE THE POD AND OUTSIDE TOO.
SHE HAD MURDER IN HER EYES, AND I WAS STARING RIGHT INTO THEM AS I BLED ALL OVER WHAT WAS PROBABLY HER SEAT
SHE RAISED HER PISTOL AND AIMED RIGHT AT MY FACE. I WAS STARING AT MY DEATH.
THEN ALEX HIT THE "GO" BUTTON, THE DOOR SLAMMED SHUT, AND OUR POD LEFT
THERE WERE FIVE EMPTY SEATS.
OF COURSE I ONLY REALLY REGRET FOUR OF 'EM BEING EMPTY

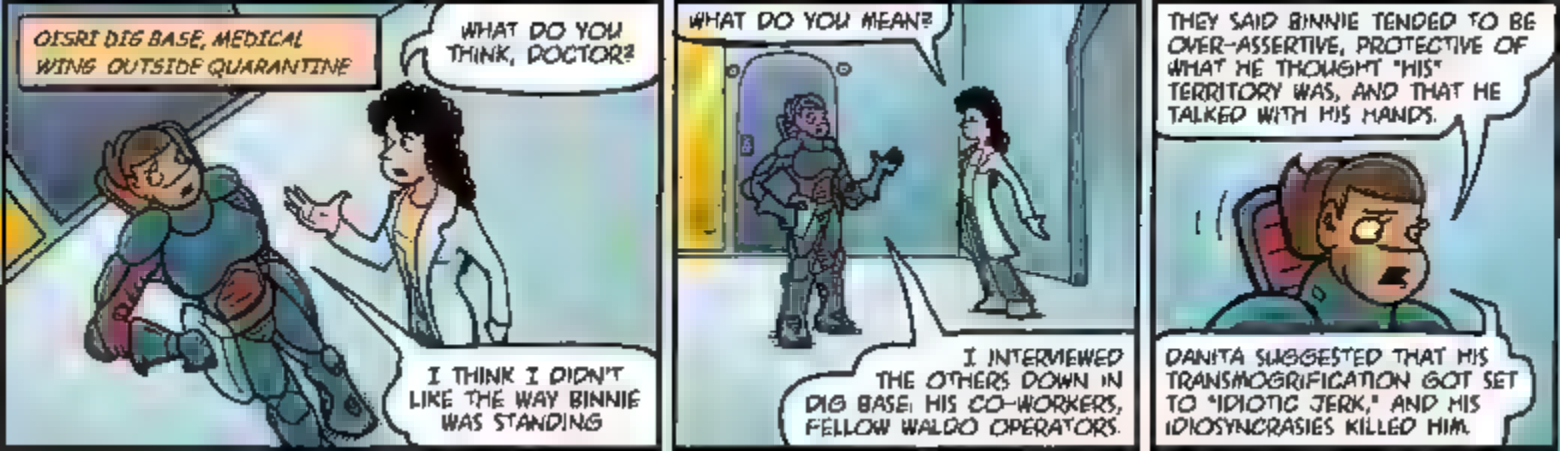

TURNED OUT THAT TERAPODS WORKED PRETTY WELL.
IT PROBABLY HELPED THAT THE ONLY T.A.D. IN PLACE BELONGED TO US.
NOTHING THE SIZE OF A BATTLEPLATE CAN 'PORT OUT OF A LOSING FIGHT, BUT THOSE LITTLE PODS 'PORTED JUST FINE.
OF COURSE, EVERY LAST PLACE WE WANTED TO GO HAD A T.A.D. UP.
RESCUE TOOK LONGER THAN I WOULD HAVE LIKED.
ONE OF YOU GUYS DIDN'T TAKE A SHOWER THIS MORNING.
SHHH... I'M TRYING TO GET THIS CLOSED UP. WE DON'T WANT YOU BLEEDING TO DEATH.
IT'D STOP THE SMELL.
AND HALF THE NOISE. NOW SHHH.

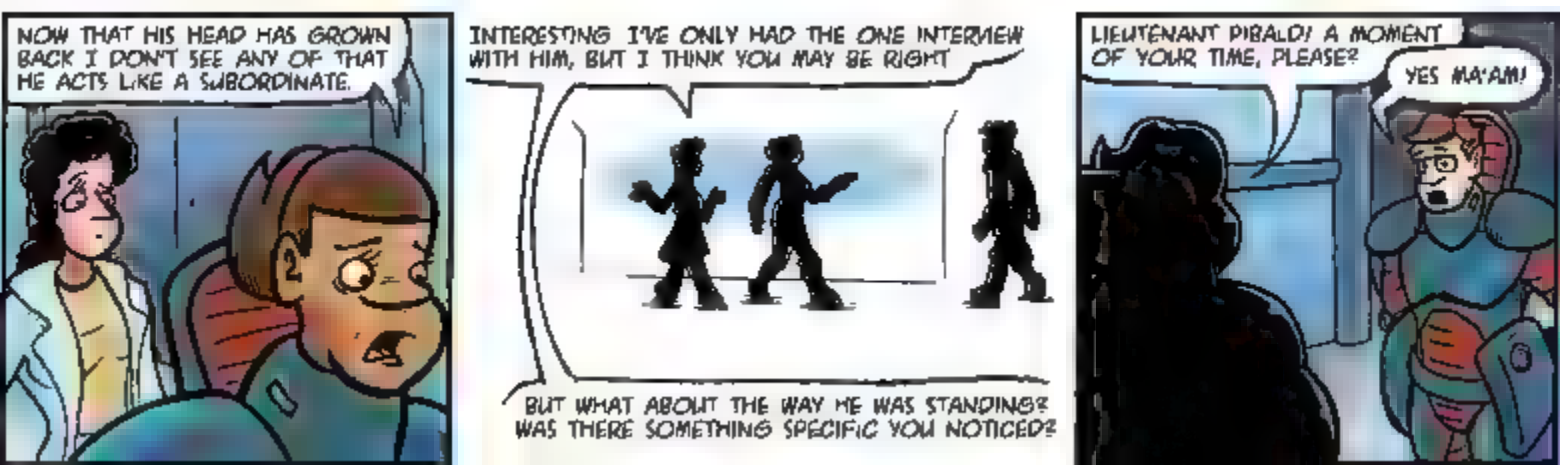

LONG STORY SHORT I LIVED
WE MUSTERED OUT AND A
"TO ABSENT FRIENDS" TOAST
LED TO A BINGE, AND A
VERY CRAZY PLAN.
I'M DONE. YOUR
TURN, GENERAL.
MY TURN²
STORY TIME.
We're docked. You need
to debark now, unless we
want to spring for very
expensive parking.
HAH! SAVED BY
THE DOCKING CLAMP
YOU'RE NOT GETTING OFF THAT EASY
THE NEXT STORY SESSION WILL BE IN A
BAR, AND YOU'RE BUYING THE FIRST
ROUND
THAT'S NOT
HOW IT WORKS.
NO, BUT THAT'S
HOW IT'S BROKEN.

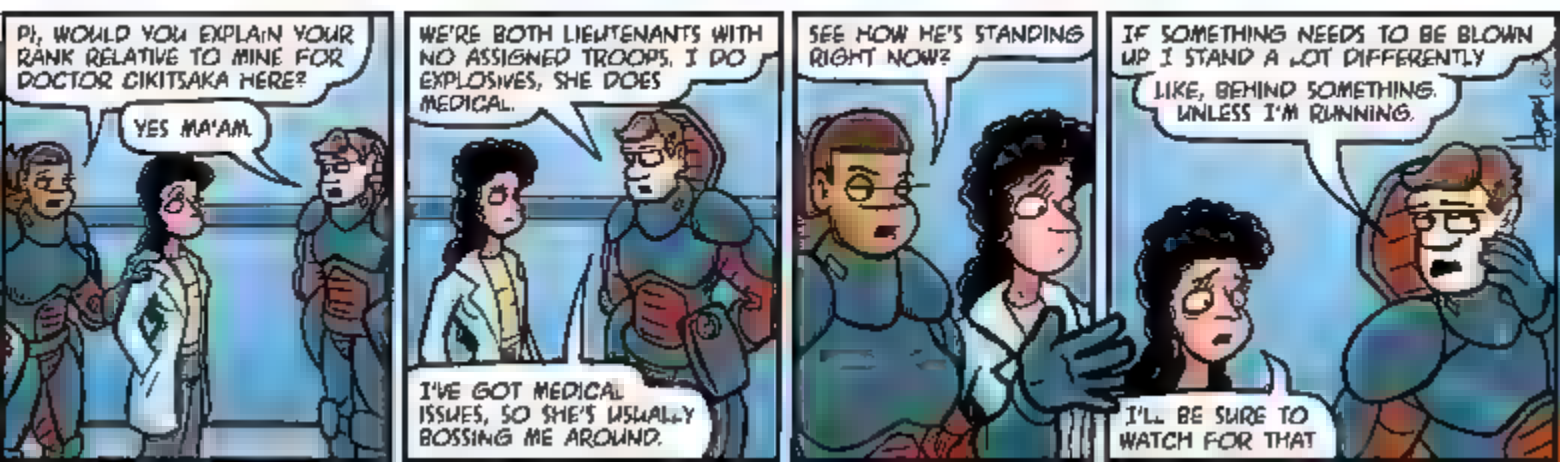

OISRI DIG BASE MEDICAL WING
DOCTOR BUNNIGUS, I PRESUME?
YES. DOCTOR CIKITSAKA, I'M GLAD YOU CAME IN PERSON.
IT WAS NO TROUBLE. NOTTERI AGAIN WAS MAKING A SUPPLY RUN.
BESIDES, I WANTED TO SEE THIS FOR MYSELF
THE PATIENT IS RIGHT THIS WAY, CONSCIOUS AND NOT AT ALL LIKE A ZOMBIE HE'S STILL UNDER QUARANTINE, OF COURSE. THAT'S S.O.P FOR ANY CASE OF NECROMOTILITY
FOR NOW, YES.
WE'LL HAVE TO REWRITE S.O.P ONCE WE'RE SURE RETRO-EXOCEPHALODERM WORKS LIKE IT'S SUPPOSED TO
IF IT'S SUPPOSED TO GIVE THE REST OF US NIGHTMARES, IT WORKS LIKE A DREAM

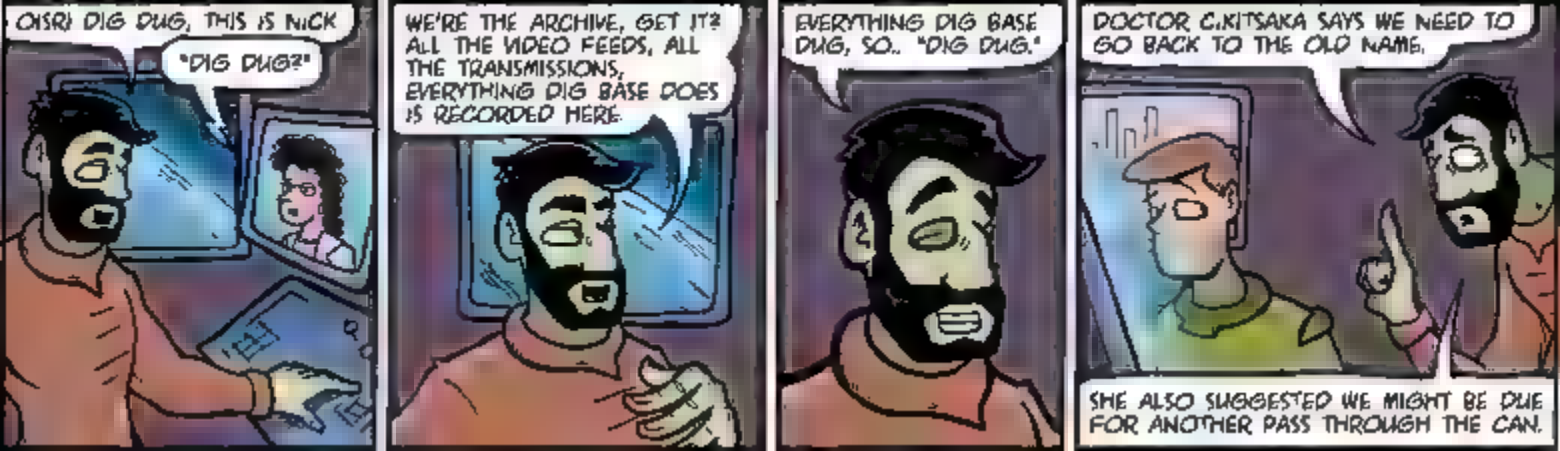

DOCTOR CIKITSAKA! YOU'RE HERE! THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR COMING.
HOW ARE YOU FEELING, BINNIE?
I'M SICK OF TV I'M READY TO BE DONE SITTING AROUND HOLDING MY... MY BREATH.
WELL, LET ME SUIT UP AND LOOK AT YOU. I'M SURE WE'LL BE ABLE TO PUT YOU BACK TO WORK SOON.
THANK YOU, SIR. ERR... MA'AM.
SORRY
DON'T WORRY, BINNIE I'VE BEEN BOTH.
OF COURSE, I DID HOPE THE BOOB JOB WOULD FURTHER REDUCE ANY AMBIGUITY.


HMM... STILL A LOT OF ACTIVITY AMONG THE NANNIES.
I'VE SEEN THE VID. WALDORK THREW ME CLEAR ACROSS THE BAY. I BET THE NANNIES ARE JUST FINISHING TISSUE REPAIRS.
IT'S BEEN A WEEK, BINNIE. THEY GREW YOU A NEW HEAD, AND EVEN PUT YOUR HAIR BACK. THE REST SHOULD HAVE HEALED ALREADY
OUTSTANDING. YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE ME STAY HERE AND WATCH MORE TV
THE MEDIA TEAM FOUND A FAN-SIM CONCLUSION TO THE X-FILES THAT'S ACTUALLY PRETTY GOOD.
IF IT DOESN'T RECONCILE "I WANT TO BELIEVE" WITH "TRUST NO ONE" I WON'T BE SATISFIED

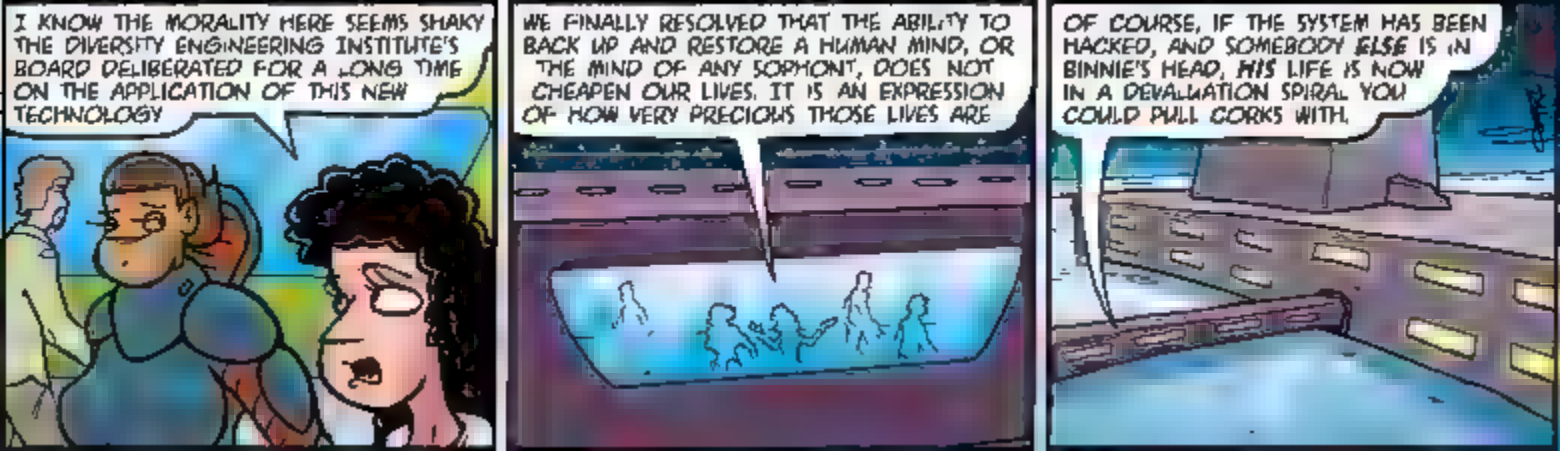

OISRI DIG BASE, MEDICAL WING OUTSIDE QUARANTINE
WHAT DO YOU THINK, DOCTOR?
I THINK I DIDN'T LIKE THE WAY BINNIE WAS STANDING
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
I INTERVIEWED THE OTHERS DOWN IN DIG BASE: HIS CO-WORKERS, FELLOW WALDO OPERATORS.
THEY SAID BINNIE TENDED TO BE OVER-ASSERTIVE, PROTECTIVE OF WHAT HE THOUGHT "HIS" TERRITORY WAS, AND THAT HE TALKED WITH HIS HANDS.
DANITA SUGGESTED THAT HIS TRANSMOGRIFICATION GOT SET TO "IDIOTIC JERK," AND HIS IDIOSYNCRASIES KILLED HIM.

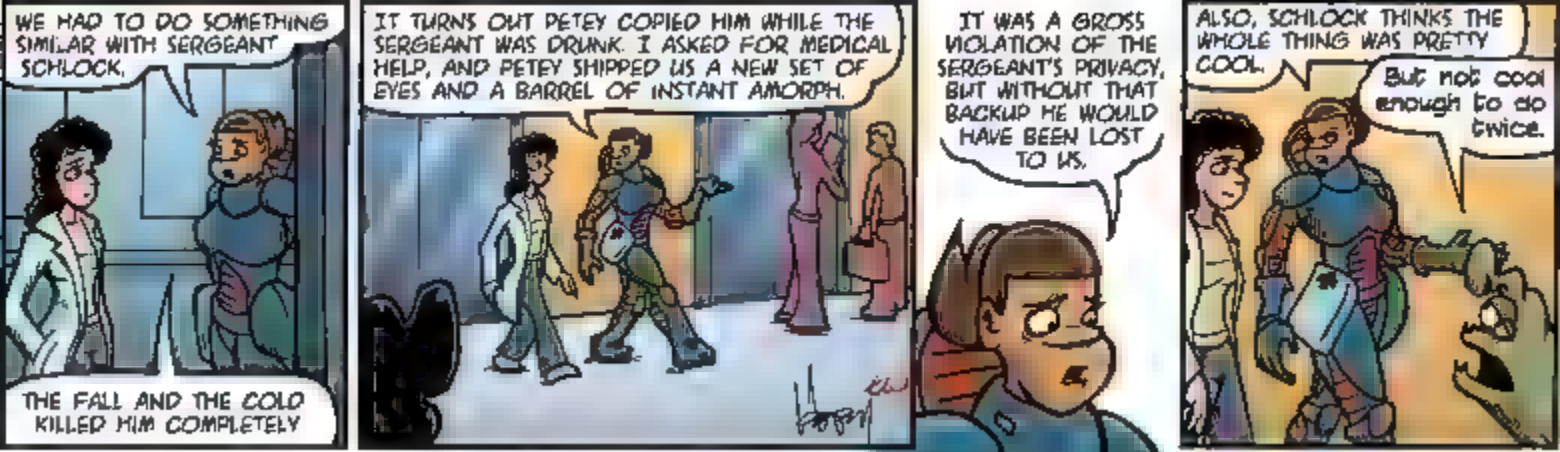

NOW THAT HIS HEAD HAS GROWN BACK I DON'T SEE ANY OF THAT HE ACTS LIKE A SUBORDINATE.
INTERESTING. I'VE ONLY HAD THE ONE INTERVIEW WITH HIM, BUT I THINK YOU MAY BE RIGHT.
BUT WHAT ABOUT THE WAY HE WAS STANDING? WAS THERE SOMETHING SPECIFIC YOU NOTICED?
LIEUTENANT PIBALD! A MOMENT OF YOUR TIME, PLEASE?
YES MA'AM!


PJ, WOULD YOU EXPLAIN YOUR RANK RELATIVE TO MINE FOR DOCTOR CIKITSAKA HERE?
YES MA'AM.
WE'RE BOTH LIEUTENANTS WITH NO ASSIGNED TROOPS. I DO EXPLOSIVES, SHE DOES MEDICAL.
I'VE GOT MEDICAL ISSUES, SO SHE'S USUALLY BOSSING ME AROUND.
SEE HOW HE'S STANDING RIGHT NOW?
IF SOMETHING NEEDS TO BE BLOWN UP I STAND A LOT DIFFERENTLY
LIKE, BEHIND SOMETHING. UNLESS I'M RUNNING.
I'LL BE SURE TO WATCH FOR THAT

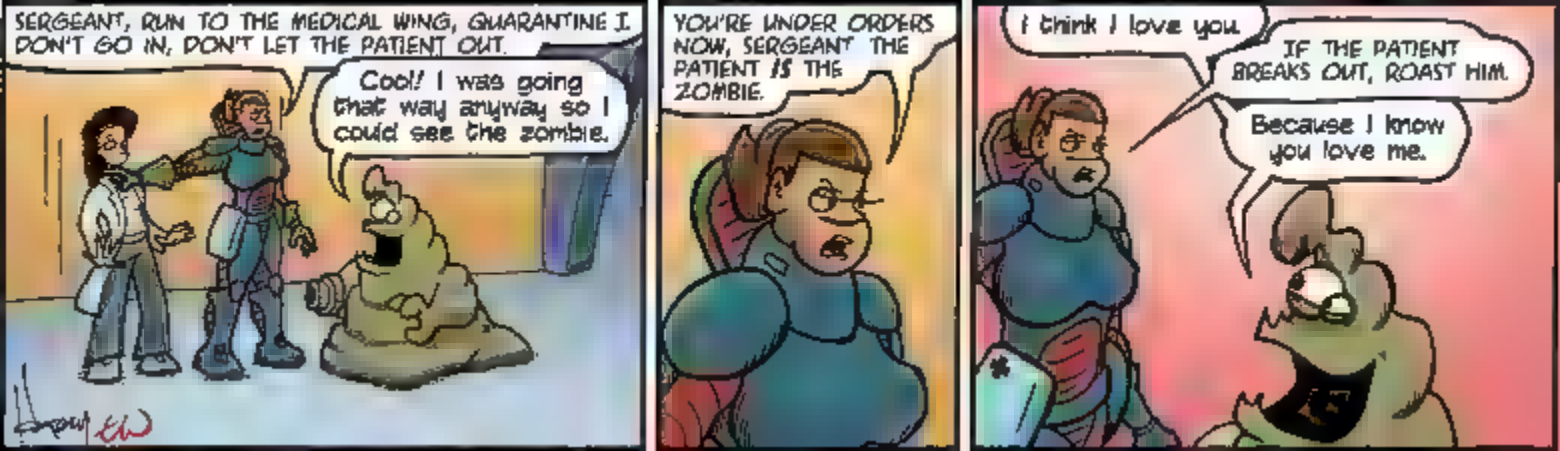

OISR! DIG DUG, THIS IS NICK
"DIG DUG?"
WE'RE THE ARCHIVE, GET IT? ALL THE VIDEO FEEDS, ALL THE TRANSMISSIONS, EVERYTHING DIG BASE DOES IS RECORDED HERE.
EVERYTHING DIG BASE DUG, SO.. "DIG DUG."
DOCTOR C.KITSAKA SAYS WE NEED TO GO BACK TO THE OLD NAME.
SHE ALSO SUGGESTED WE MIGHT BE DUE FOR ANOTHER PASS THROUGH THE CAN.

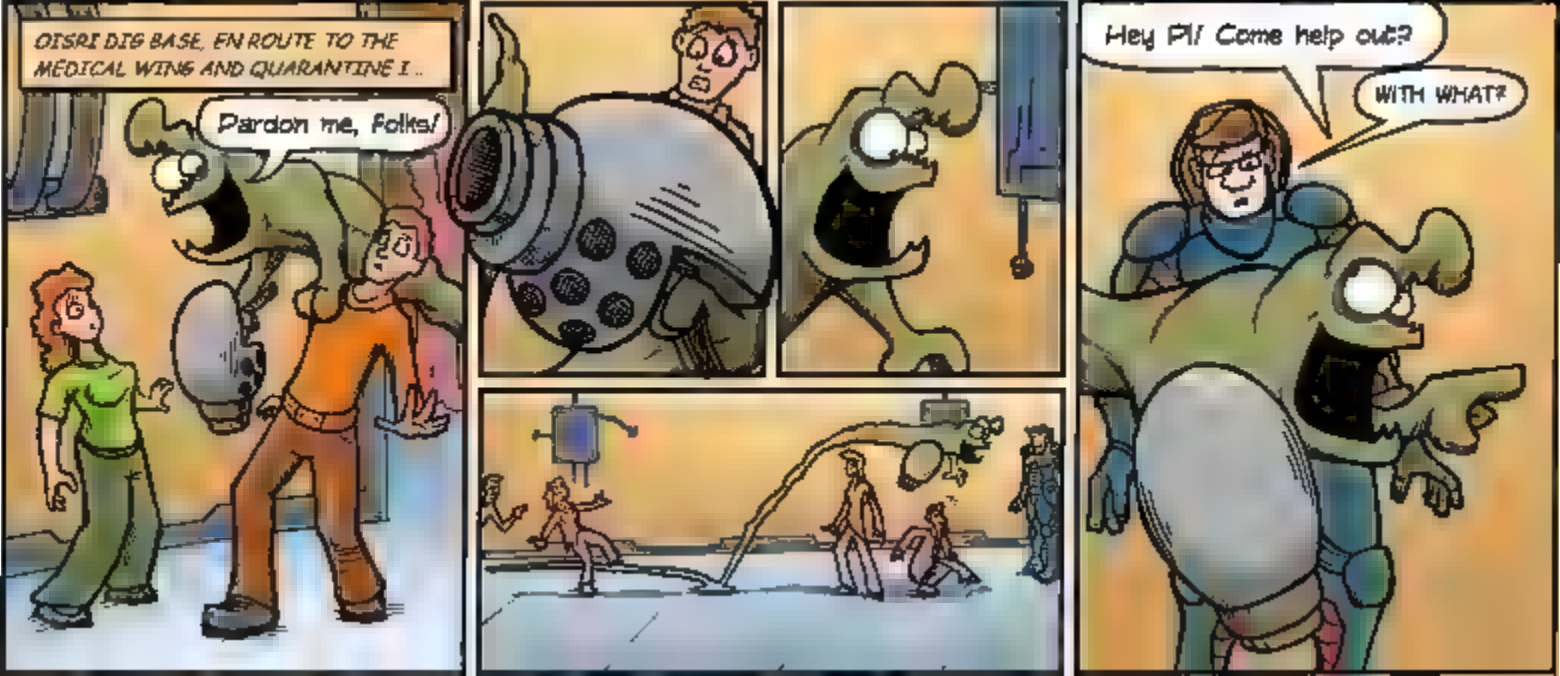

THE GUYS IN MONITORING ARE PULLING UP VIDEO OF BINNIE FOR US TO REVIEW.
IF HIS BEHAVIOR HAS CHANGED, WE'LL SEE IT
THAT'S NICE BUT WHAT WILL WE DO ABOUT IT?
IF RETRO-EXOCEPHALODERM GOT CORRUPTED LOCALLY, WE'LL REVERT HIM TO THE ASYNC BACKUP
I DOUBT BINNIE WILL CONSENT TO HAVING HIS HEAD REMOVED AGAIN.
IF YOU'RE RIGHT, WE'VE MOVED WAY PAST ASKING FOR CONSENT

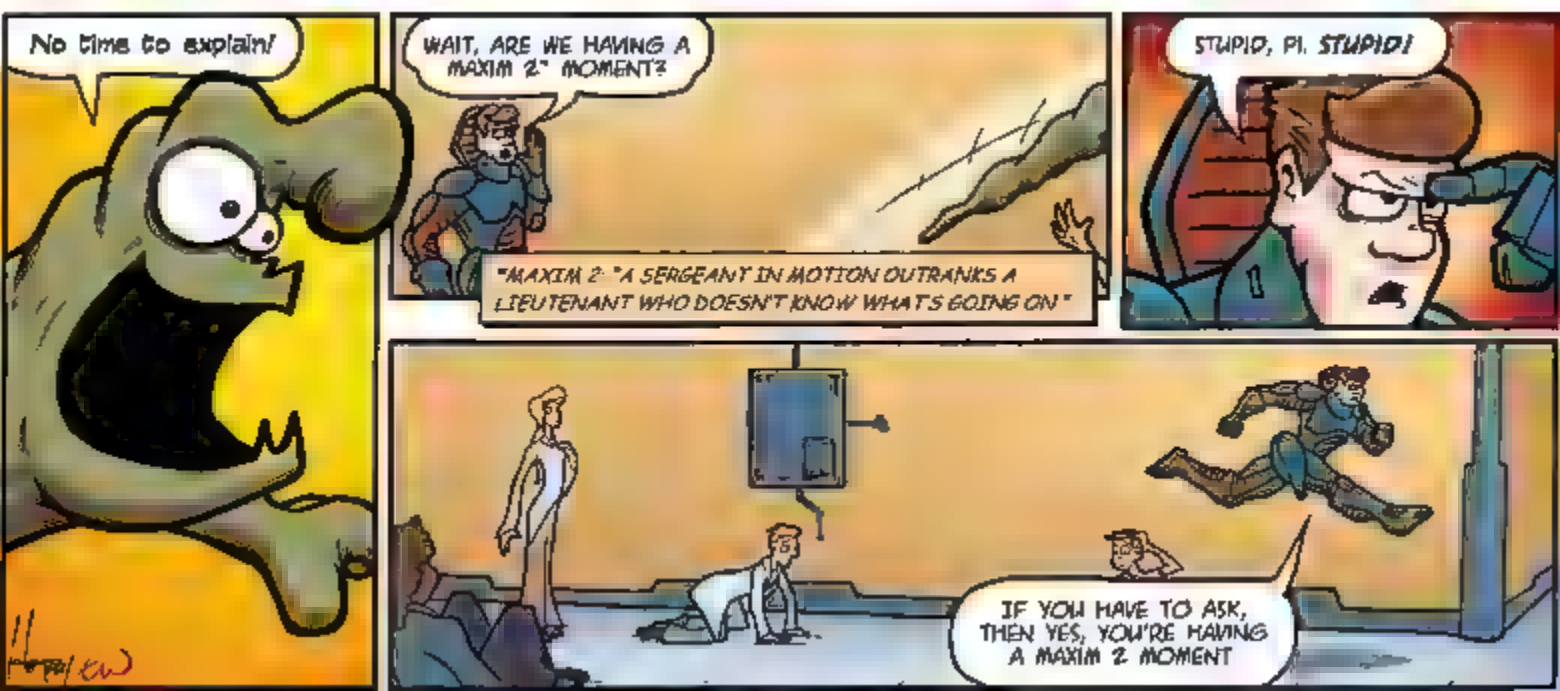

I KNOW THE MORALITY HERE SEEMS SHAKY THE DIVERSITY ENGINEERING INSTITUTE'S BOARD DELIBERATED FOR A LONG TIME ON THE APPLICATION OF THIS NEW TECHNOLOGY
WE FINALLY RESOLVED THAT THE ABILITY TO BACK UP AND RESTORE A HUMAN MIND, OR THE MIND OF ANY SOPHONT, DOES NOT CHEAPEN OUR LIVES. IT IS AN EXPRESSION OF HOW VERY PRECIOUS THOSE LIVES ARE
OF COURSE, IF THE SYSTEM HAS BEEN HACKED, AND SOMEBODY ELSE IS IN BINNIE'S HEAD, HIS LIFE IS NOW IN A DEVALUATION SPIRAL YOU COULD PULL CORKS WITH.

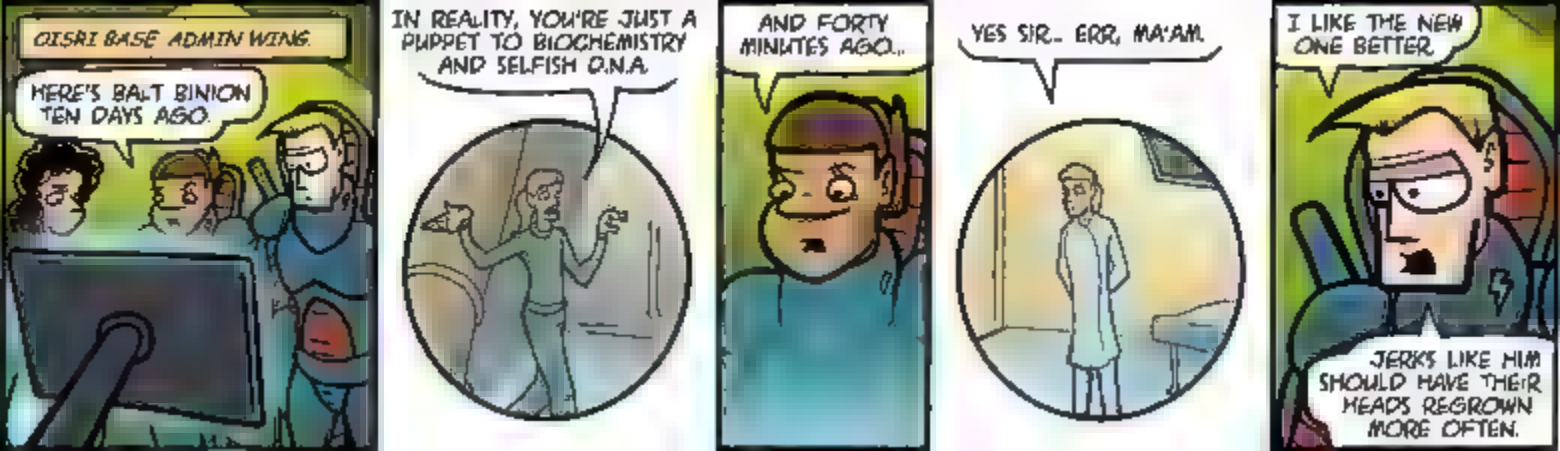

WE HAD TO DO SOMETHING SIMILAR WITH SERGEANT SCHLOCK.
THE FALL AND THE COLD KILLED HIM COMPLETELY
IT TURNS OUT PETEY COPIED HIM WHILE THE SERGEANT WAS DRUNK. I ASKED FOR MEDICAL HELP, AND PETEY SHIPPED US A NEW SET OF EYES AND A BARREL OF INSTANT AMORPH.
IT WAS A GROSS VIOLATION OF THE SERGEANT'S PRIVACY, BUT WITHOUT THAT BACKUP HE WOULD HAVE BEEN LOST TO US.
ALSO, SCHLOCK THINKS THE WHOLE THING WAS PRETTY COOL.
But not cool enough to do twice.


DOCTOR, I'M SORRY I JUST REAL ZED WE'RE GOING ABOUT THIS WRONG.
I NEED TO ALERT MY CAPTAIN TO OUR SUSPICIONS.
THIS ISN'T A MEDICAL PROBLEM ANYMORE. IT'S A SECURITY PROBLEM.
Those are magic words, and I don't even know what's wrong.

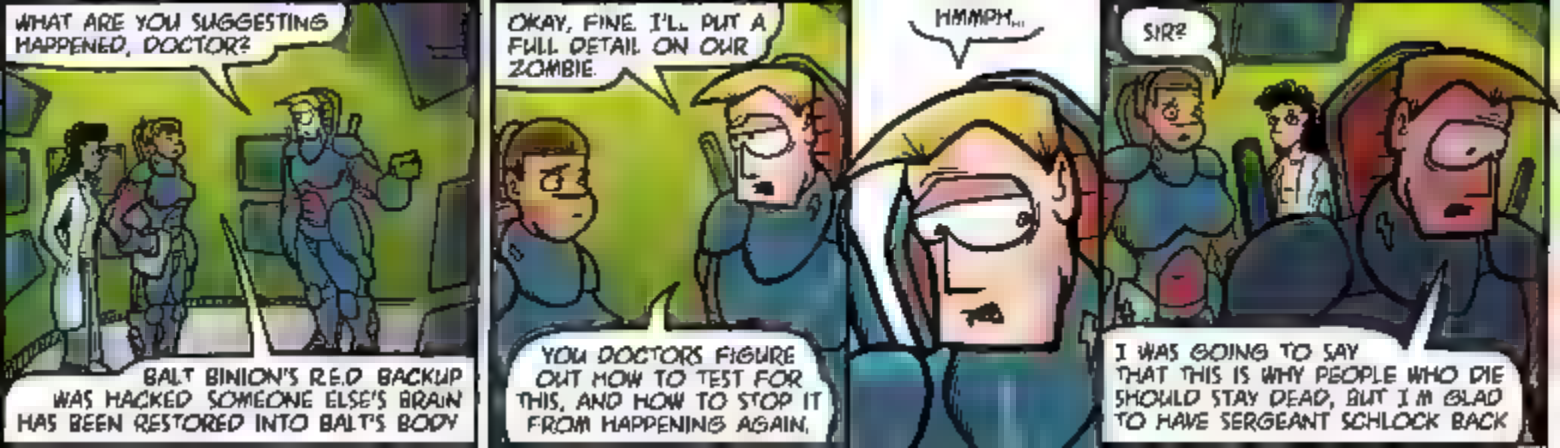

SERGEANT, RUN TO THE MEDICAL WING, QUARANTINE I. DON'T GO IN, DON'T LET THE PATIENT OUT.
Cool! I was going that way anyway so I could see the zombie.
YOU'RE UNDER ORDERS NOW, SERGEANT. THE PATIENT IS THE ZOMBIE.
I think I love you.
IF THE PATIENT BREAKS OUT, ROAST HIM.
Because I know you love me.


OISRI DIG BASE, EN ROUTE TO THE MEDICAL WING AND QUARANTINE I..
Pardon me, folks!
Hey PI! Come help out?
WITH WHAT?


No time to explain!
WAIT, ARE WE HAVING A MAXIM 2" MOMENT?
"MAXIM 2: "A SERGEANT IN MOTION OUTRANKS A LIEUTENANT WHO DOESN'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON"
STUPID, PI. STUPID!
IF YOU HAVE TO ASK, THEN YES, YOU'RE HAVING A MAXIM 2 MOMENT


OISRI BASE ADMIN WING.
HERE'S BALT BINION TEN DAYS AGO.
IN REALITY, YOU'RE JUST A PUPPET TO BIOCHEMISTRY AND SELFISH D.N.A.
AND FORTY MINUTES AGO...
YES SIR.. ERR, MA'AM.
I LIKE THE NEW ONE BETTER.
JERKS LIKE HIM SHOULD HAVE THEIR HEADS REGROWN MORE OFTEN.


FIVE MINUTES OF BEFORE-AND-AFTER CLIPS LATER
OKAY, HE DOES SEEM TO BE ACTING DIFFERENTLY
BUT ISN'T IT POSSIBLE THAT HE LEARNED A LITTLE HUMILITY WHEN HE RIPPED HIS OWN HEAD OFF?
NO. THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE WAS LOST, STREWN IN AN ARC ACROSS THE DECK OF STATION MO.
YOU KNOW, HIS BRAINS? ON THE FLOOR?
YES, I KNOW I STEPPED IN SOME OF THAT LEARNING.

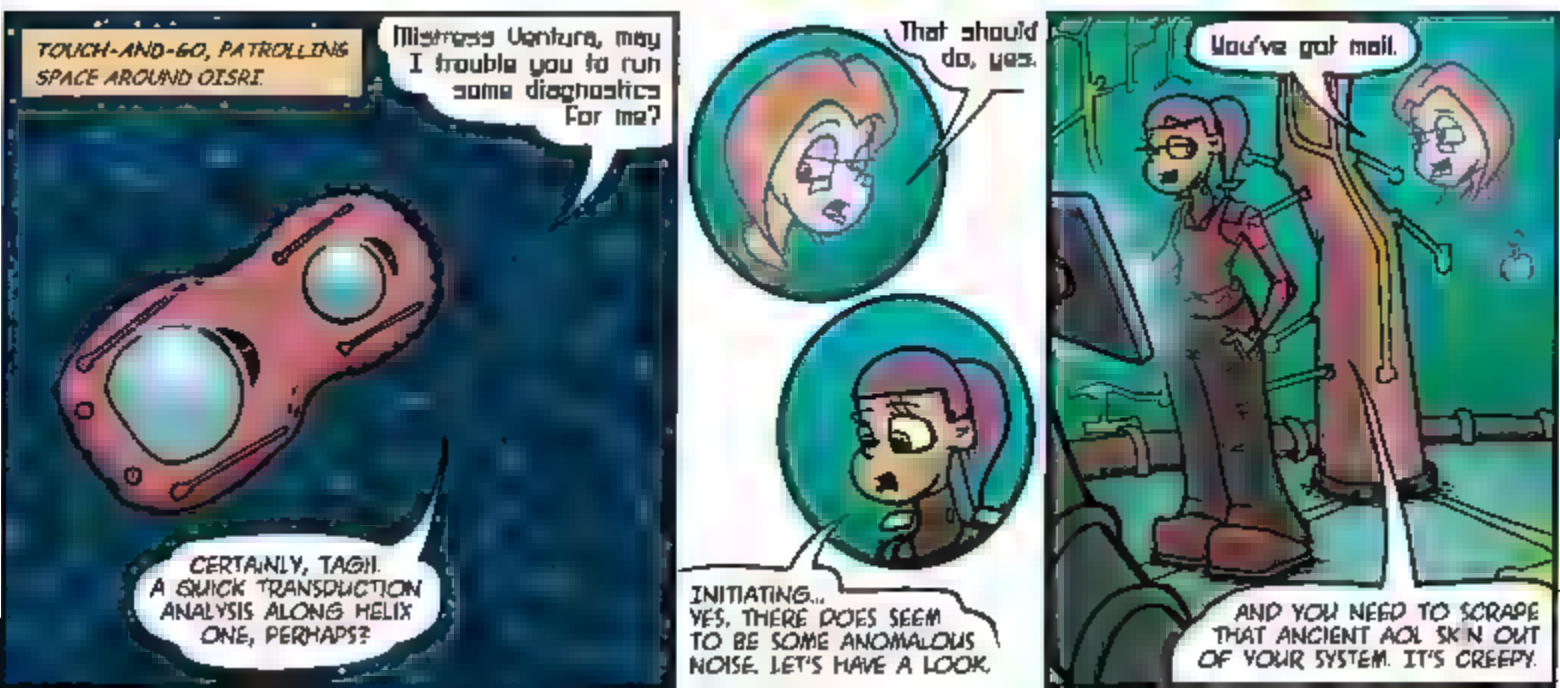

WHAT ARE YOU SUGGESTING HAPPENED, DOCTOR?
BALT BINION'S R.E.D BACKUP WAS HACKED SOMEONE ELSE'S BRAIN HAS BEEN RESTORED INTO BALT'S BODY
OKAY, FINE. I'LL PUT A FULL DETAIL ON OUR ZOMBIE.
YOU DOCTORS FIGURE OUT HOW TO TEST FOR THIS, AND HOW TO STOP IT FROM HAPPENING AGAIN.
HMMPH...
SIR?
I WAS GOING TO SAY THAT THIS IS WHY PEOPLE WHO DIE SHOULD STAY DEAD, BUT I'M GLAD TO HAVE SERGEANT SCHLOCK BACK

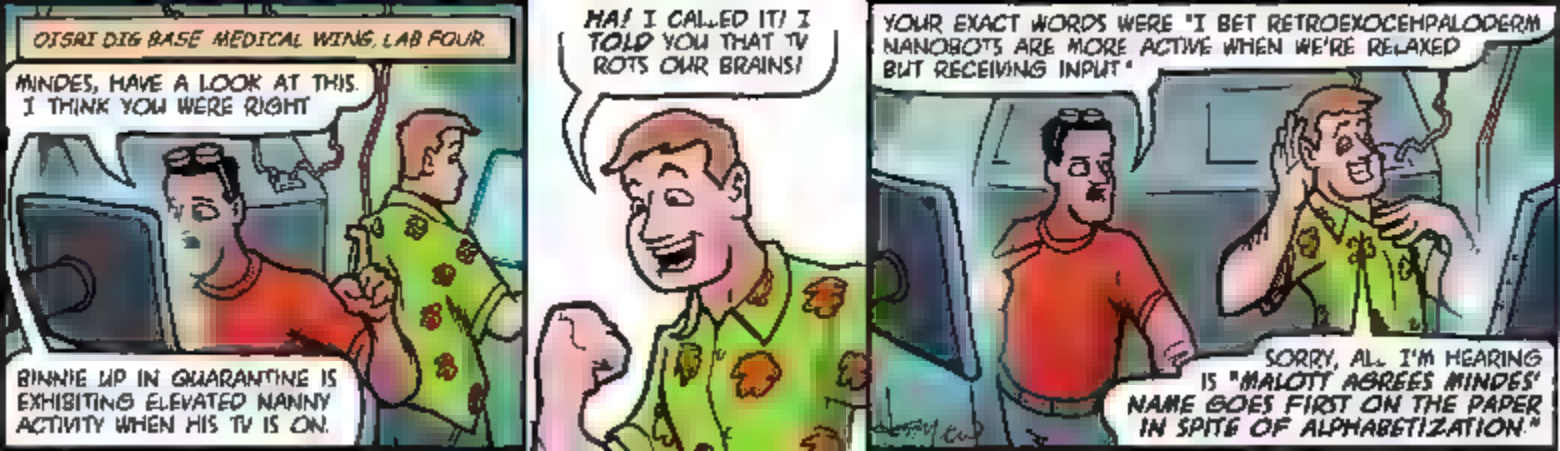

MEDICAL WING QUARANTINE I..
I'M HERE. WHAT ARE WE DOING?
Watching the zombie and making sure he doesn't escape.
HOW LIKELY IS HE TO ESCAPE?
Dunno, but Tagii made me a new plasgun. I'm hoping the zombie comes straight through the glass.
CAN YOU TURN THE MIC OFF IN THERE? I'LL SLEEP BETTER IF I CAN'T HEAR YOU.

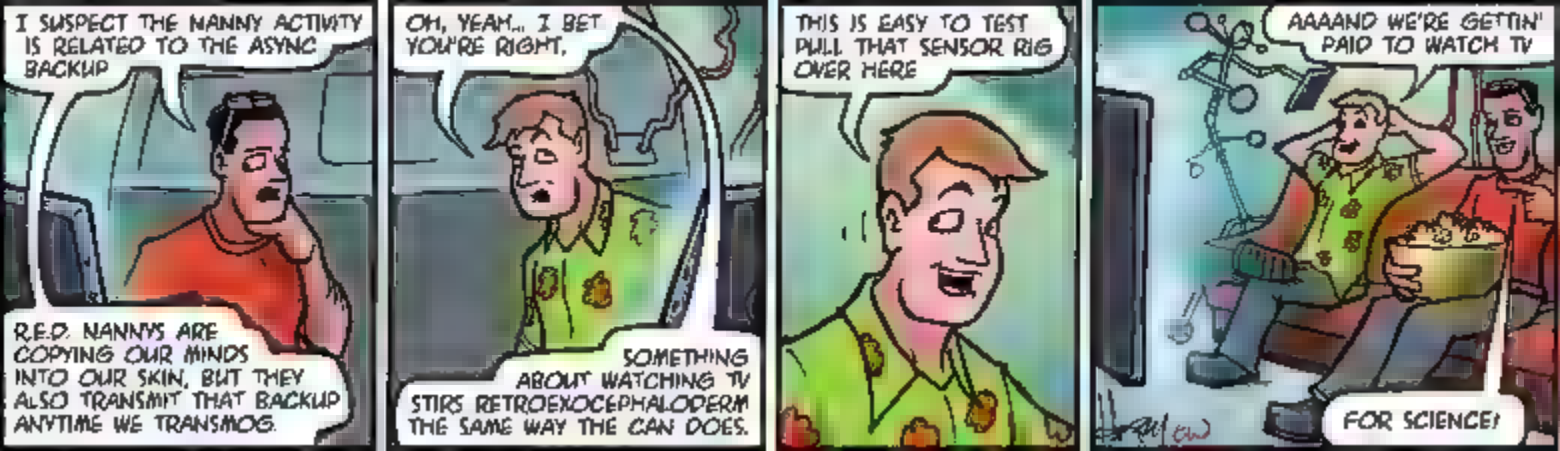

THIS ISN'T GLASS. IT'S A REINFORCED TRANSPARENT POLYMER UNDER A NON-REACTIVE DIAMOND LAMINATE.
So he'll have to punch it really hard to come through it?
HE'LL HAVE BETTER LUCK PUNCHING HIS WAY INTO A TANK.
How would you break through it?
SIX ELEVEN-GRAM BEADS OF BOOMEX ON A STRING OF RES-AMP DET THREAD
Your toys sound cooler than mine.
THEY SOUND LOUDER, TOO.


THE WINDOW IS THE STRONGEST POINT OF THIS QUARANTINE. IF I WANTED TO ESCAPE, I'D GO THROUGH THE WEAKEST.
Which point's that?
THE WETWARE. I'D TALK MY CAPTORS INTO OPENING THE DOOR
OF COURSE I KNOW YOU'D OPEN IT JUST TO TRY OUT YOUR PLASMA CANNON ON ME, SO THAT'S NOT THE WEAKEST POINT
MAYBE I COULD WAIT 'TILL I'M BETTER, BUT FOR THAT PLAN TO WORK I'D NEED TO SLEEP, AND YOU'D NEED TO TURN OFF THE MIC

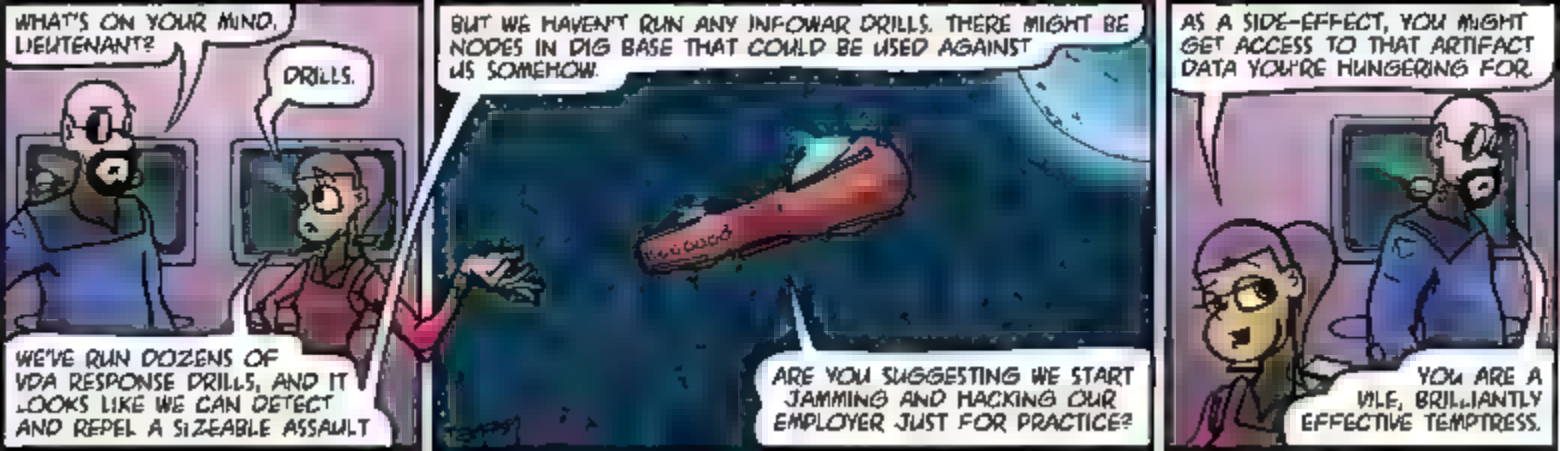

U.N.S INT AFF INT EUROPA
"USAR" HAS EYES ALL OVER OISRI. ACCORDING TO THE LAST PACKET WE RECEIVED THE GAVS STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT THE ARTIFACT IS, AND THE TOUGHS ARE REASONABLY WELL EMPLACED BOTH IN ORBIT AND ON THE GROUND.
OKAY NOW COMPARE THAT TO THIS MOST RECENT PACKET FROM "MANIS."
INTERESTING.. OH, MY... THIS IS WORRISOME. I'LL DROP "USAR" SOME NEW ORDERS. OUR LITTLE PLANT NEEDS TO TAKE A MORE ACTIVE ROLE IN AFFAIRS.

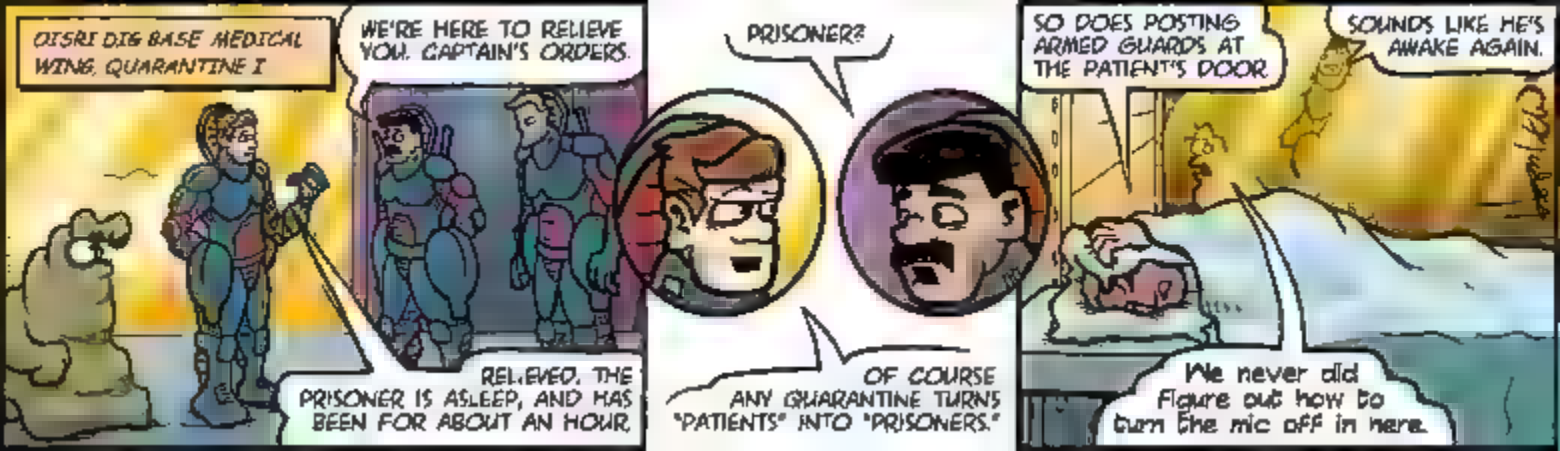

TOUCH-AND-GO, PATROLLING SPACE AROUND OISRI.
Mistress Ventura, may I trouble you to run some diagnostics for me?
CERTAINLY, TAG!! A QUICK TRANSDUCTION ANALYSIS ALONG HELIX ONE, PERHAPS?
That should do, yes.
INITIATING... YES, THERE DOES SEEM TO BE SOME ANOMALOUS NOISE. LET'S HAVE A LOOK.
You've got mail.
AND YOU NEED TO SCRAPE THAT ANCIENT AOL SKIN OUT OF YOUR SYSTEM. IT'S CREEPY.


OTSRI DIG BASE MEDICAL WING, LAB FOUR.
MINDES, HAVE A LOOK AT THIS. I THINK YOU WERE RIGHT
BINNIE UP IN QUARANTINE IS EXHIBITING ELEVATED NANNY ACTIVITY WHEN HIS TV IS ON.
HA! I CALLED IT! I TOLD YOU THAT TV ROTS OUR BRAINS!
YOUR EXACT WORDS WERE "I BET RETROEXOCEHPALODERM NANOBOTS ARE MORE ACTIVE WHEN WE'RE RELAXED BUT RECEIVING INPUT"
SORRY, AL. I'M HEARING IS "MALOTT AGREES MINDES' NAME GOES FIRST ON THE PAPER IN SPITE OF ALPHABETIZATION."

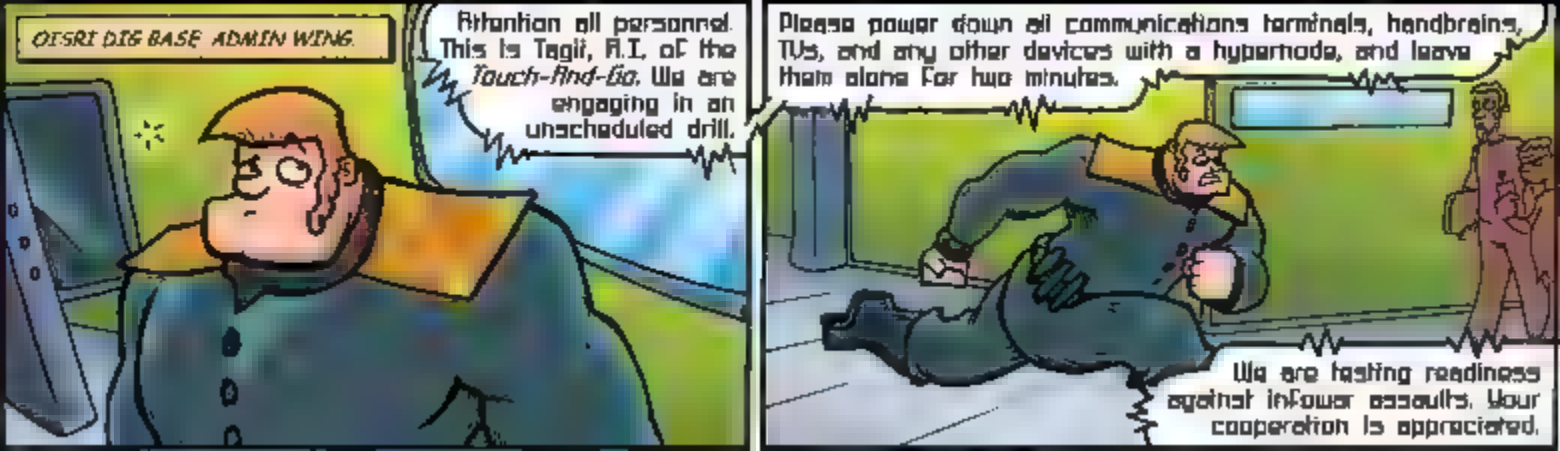

I SUSPECT THE NANNY ACTIVITY IS RELATED TO THE ASYNC BACKUP
R.E.D. NANNYS ARE COPYING OUR MINDS INTO OUR SKIN, BUT THEY ALSO TRANSMIT THAT BACKUP ANYTIME WE TRANSMOG.
OH, YEAH... I BET YOU'RE RIGHT.
SOMETHING ABOUT WATCHING TV STIRS RETROEXOCEPHALODERM THE SAME WAY THE CAN DOES.
THIS IS EASY TO TEST PULL THAT SENSOR RIG OVER HERE
AAAAND WE'RE GETTIN' PAID TO WATCH TV
FOR SCIENCE!

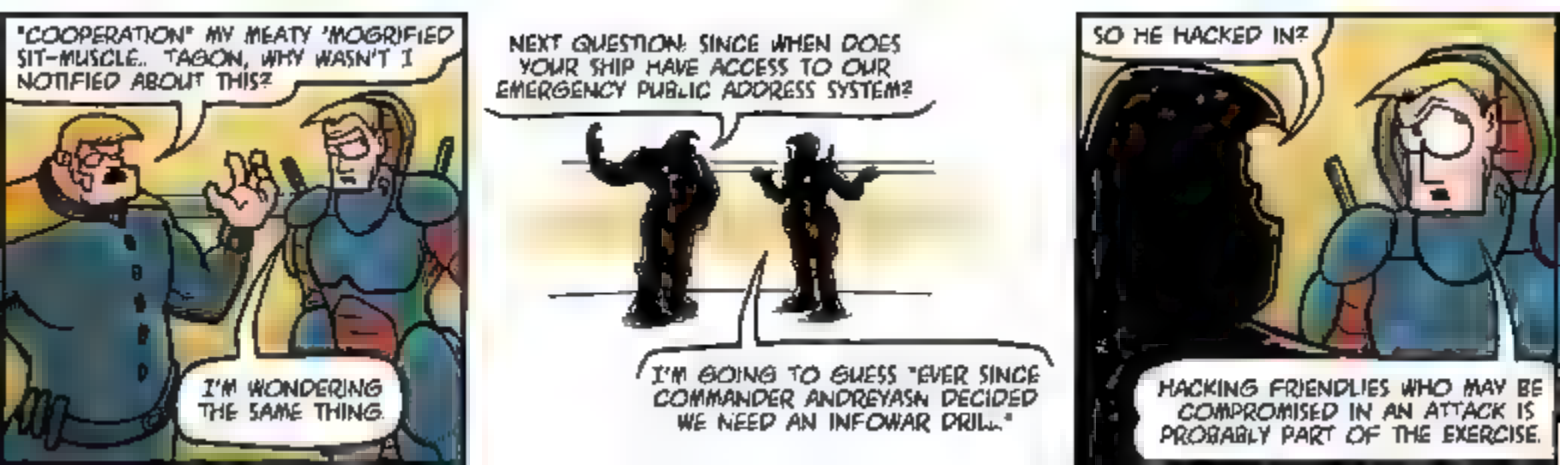

ABOARD TOUCH-AND-GO_
COMMANDER, I RAN A DIAGNOSTIC FOR TAGNI AND HAD A THOUGHT
EXCELLENT! YOU'RE ONE OF THE LUCKY FEW MERCENARIES HERE ON KAFF TAGON'S PAYROLL WHO IS, IN FACT, PAID TO THINK
AND FORTUNATELY FOR YOU, WE LET YOU THINK WITHOUT ANY SILLY RESTRICTIONS LIKE "DON'T TALK TO THE PEOPLE WHO CAN ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS."
THE ARTIFACT'S SURFACE HAS BEEN EXPOSED FOR TWO DAYS BUT ALL I GET TO LOOK AT IS GRAINY SURVEILLANCE OF OTHER PEOPLE ADMIRING THE PRETTY PICTURES.
BY THE WAY THOSE NANNY CAMS ARE GREAT THANK YOU FOR SUGGESTING THAT
I WAS LOOKING FOR A CURE FOR BITTERSNARK, BUT I'LL SETTLE FOR A "THANK YOU."


WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND, LIEUTENANT?
DRILLS.
WE'VE RUN DOZENS OF VDA RESPONSE DRILLS, AND IT LOOKS LIKE WE CAN DETECT AND REPEL A SIZEABLE ASSAULT
BUT WE HAVEN'T RUN ANY INFOWAR DRILLS. THERE MIGHT BE NODES IN DIG BASE THAT COULD BE USED AGAINST US SOMEHOW.
ARE YOU SUGGESTING WE START JAMMING AND HACKING OUR EMPLOYER JUST FOR PRACTICE?
AS A SIDE-EFFECT, YOU MIGHT GET ACCESS TO THAT ARTIFACT DATA YOU'RE HUNGERING FOR.
YOU ARE A VILE, BRILLIANTLY EFFECTIVE TEMPTRESS.

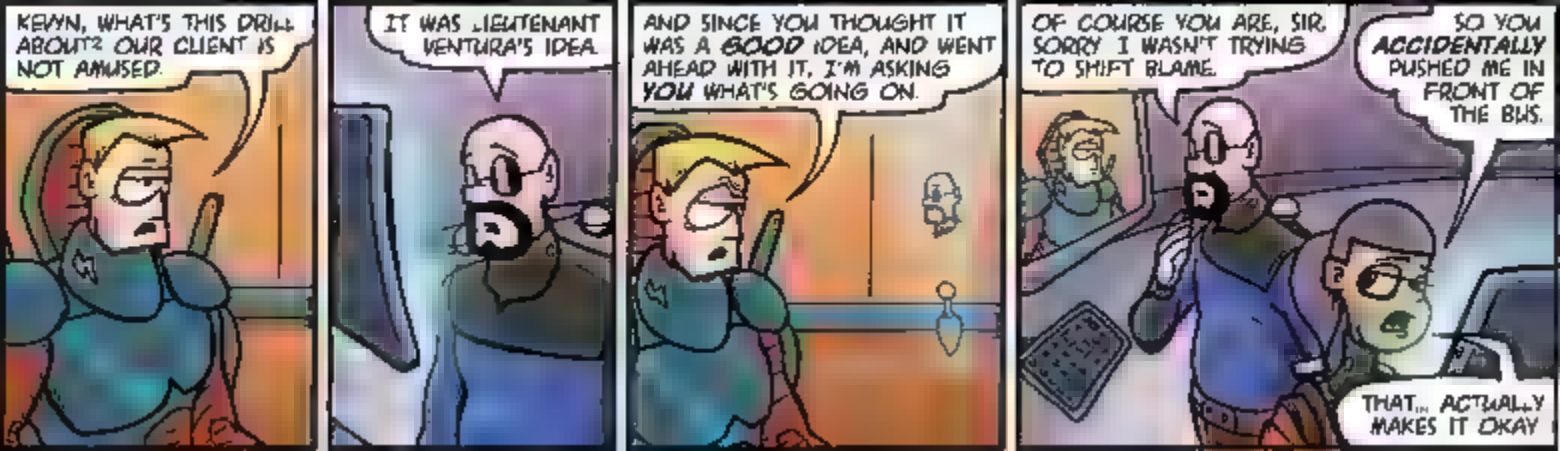

DISRI DIG BASE MEDICAL WING, QUARANTINE I
WE'RE HERE TO RELIEVE YOU. CAPTAIN'S ORDERS.
RELIEVED. THE PRISONER IS ASLEEP, AND HAS BEEN FOR ABOUT AN HOUR.
PRISONER?
OF COURSE ANY QUARANTINE TURNS "PATIENTS" INTO "PRISONERS."
SO DOES POSTING ARMED GUARDS AT THE PATIENT'S DOOR.
SOUNDS LIKE HE'S AWAKE AGAIN.
We never did figure out how to turn the mic off in here.

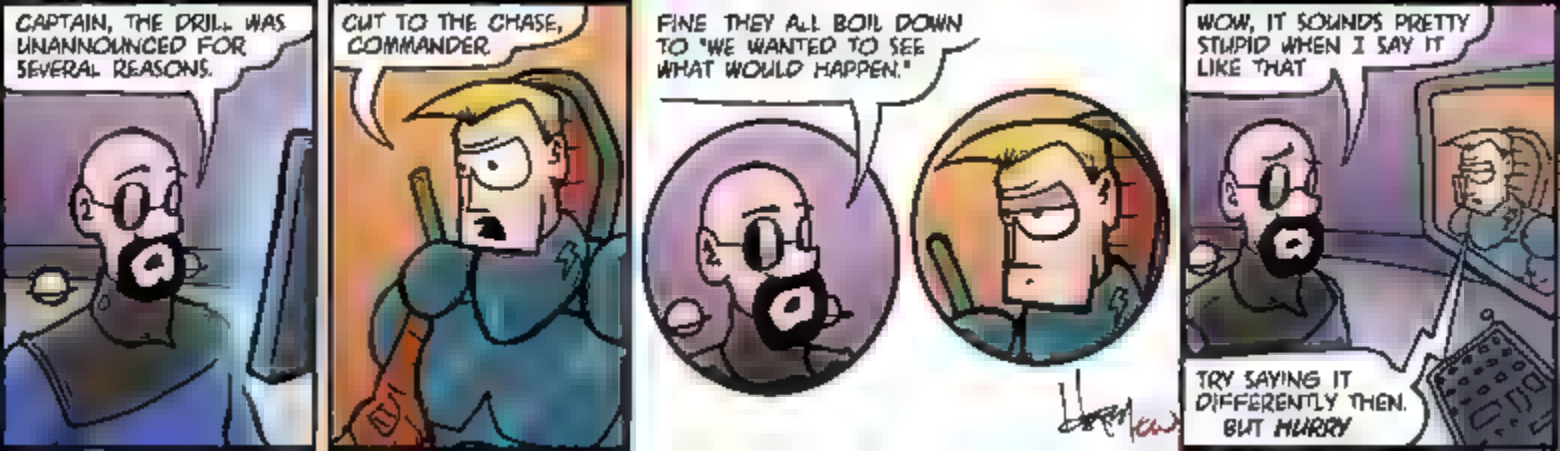

Sergeant, may I ask you a personal question?
Sure.
IF you had a big bag rolled up inside you, how quickly could you climb inside it?
I wasn't expecting a demonstration.
I wasn't expecting Medical to miss a spare biohazard bag.

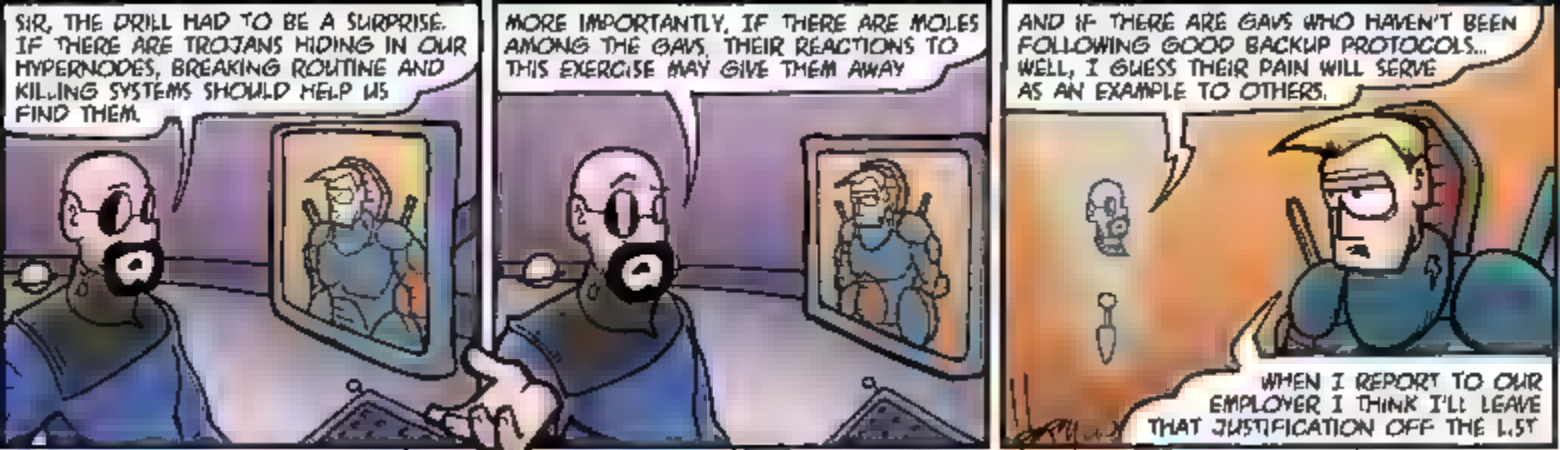

OTSRI DIG BASE ADMIN WING.
Attention all personnel. This is Tagil, A.I. of the Touch-And-Go. We are engaging in an unscheduled drill.
Please power down all communications terminals, handbrains, TVs, and any other devices with a hypermode, and leave them alone for two minutes.
We are testing readiness against inPower assaults. Your cooperation is appreciated.


"COOPERATION" MY MEATY 'MOGRIFIED SIT-MUSCLE.. TAGON, WHY WASN'T I NOTIFIED ABOUT THIS?
I'M WONDERING THE SAME THING.
NEXT QUESTION: SINCE WHEN DOES YOUR SHIP HAVE ACCESS TO OUR EMERGENCY PUBLIC ADDRESS SYSTEM?
I'M GOING TO GUESS "EVER SINCE COMMANDER ANDREYASN DECIDED WE NEED AN INFOWAR DRILL."
SO HE HACKED IN?
HACKING FRIENDLIES WHO MAY BE COMPROMISED IN AN ATTACK IS PROBABLY PART OF THE EXERCISE.


FINE. NEXT QUESTION: HOW DO I KNOW THAT THIS IS YOUR PEOPLE RUNNING A DRILL, AND NOT AN ENEMY ASSAULT AIMED AT SEVERING OUR COMMUNICATIONS FOR A COUPLE OF MINUTES?
OHHH.
Having you two overclock your malware on that question is half the point of the drill.
DOES THIS MEAN WE PASS?
DOES THIS MEAN YOU HACKED MY DISPLAY NODE?

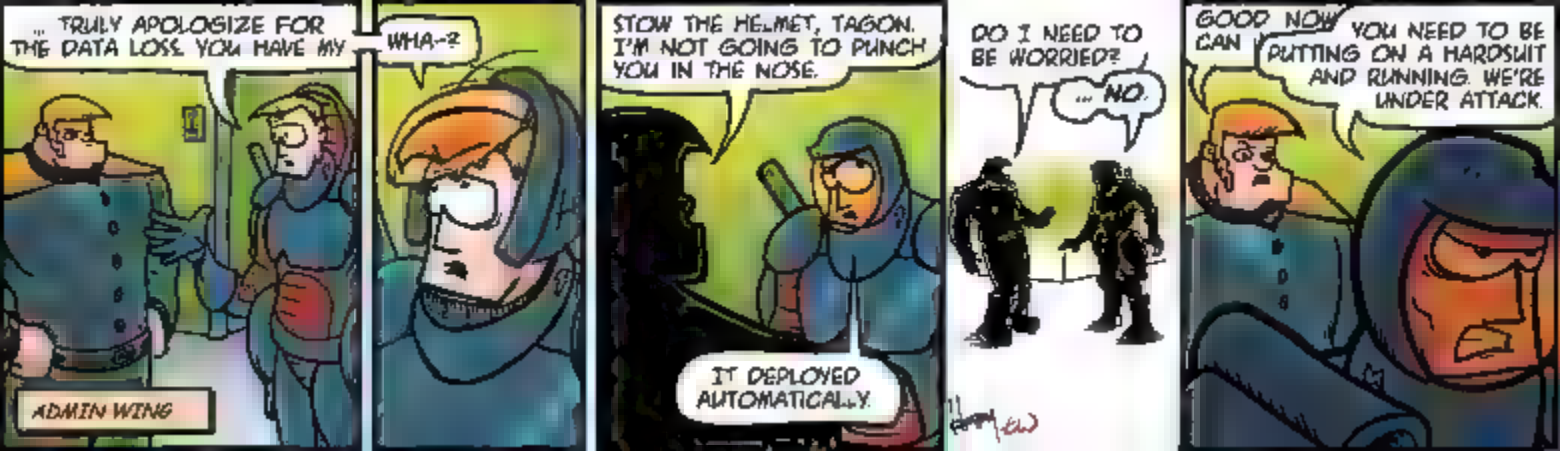

KEVYN, WHAT'S THIS DRILL ABOUT? OUR CLIENT IS NOT AMUSED.
IT WAS LIEUTENANT VENTURA'S IDEA.
AND SINCE YOU THOUGHT IT WAS A GOOD IDEA, AND WENT AHEAD WITH IT, I'M ASKING YOU WHAT'S GOING ON.
OF COURSE YOU ARE, SIR. SORRY I WASN'T TRYING TO SHIFT BLAME.
SO YOU ACCIDENTALLY PUSHED ME IN FRONT OF THE BUS.
THAT... ACTUALLY MAKES IT OKAY

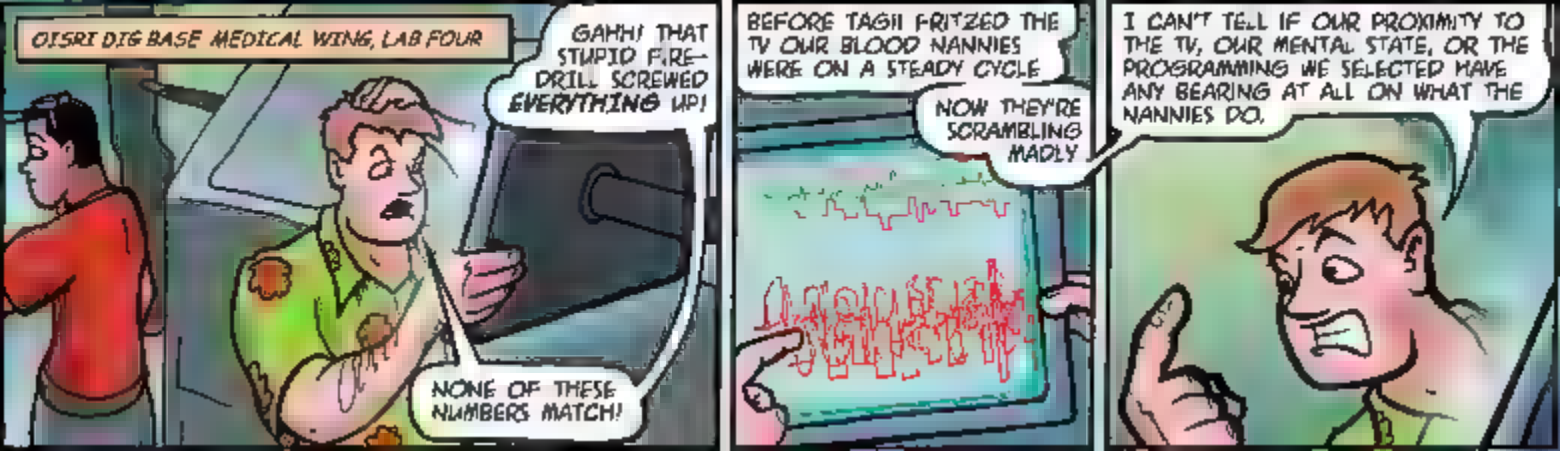

CAPTAIN, THE DRILL WAS UNANNOUNCED FOR SEVERAL REASONS.
CUT TO THE CHASE, COMMANDER.
FINE THEY ALL BOIL DOWN TO "WE WANTED TO SEE WHAT WOULD HAPPEN."
WOW, IT SOUNDS PRETTY STUPID WHEN I SAY IT LIKE THAT
TRY SAYING IT DIFFERENTLY THEN. BUT HURRY


SIR, THE DRILL HAD TO BE A SURPRISE. IF THERE ARE TROJANS HIDING IN OUR HYPERNODES, BREAKING ROUTINE AND KILLING SYSTEMS SHOULD HELP US FIND THEM.
MORE IMPORTANTLY, IF THERE ARE MOLES AMONG THE GAVS, THEIR REACTIONS TO THIS EXERCISE MAY GIVE THEM AWAY
AND IF THERE ARE GAVS WHO HAVEN'T BEEN FOLLOWING GOOD BACKUP PROTOCOLS... WELL, I GUESS THEIR PAIN WILL SERVE AS AN EXAMPLE TO OTHERS.
WHEN I REPORT TO OUR EMPLOYER I THINK I'LL LEAVE THAT JUSTIFICATION OFF THE LIST

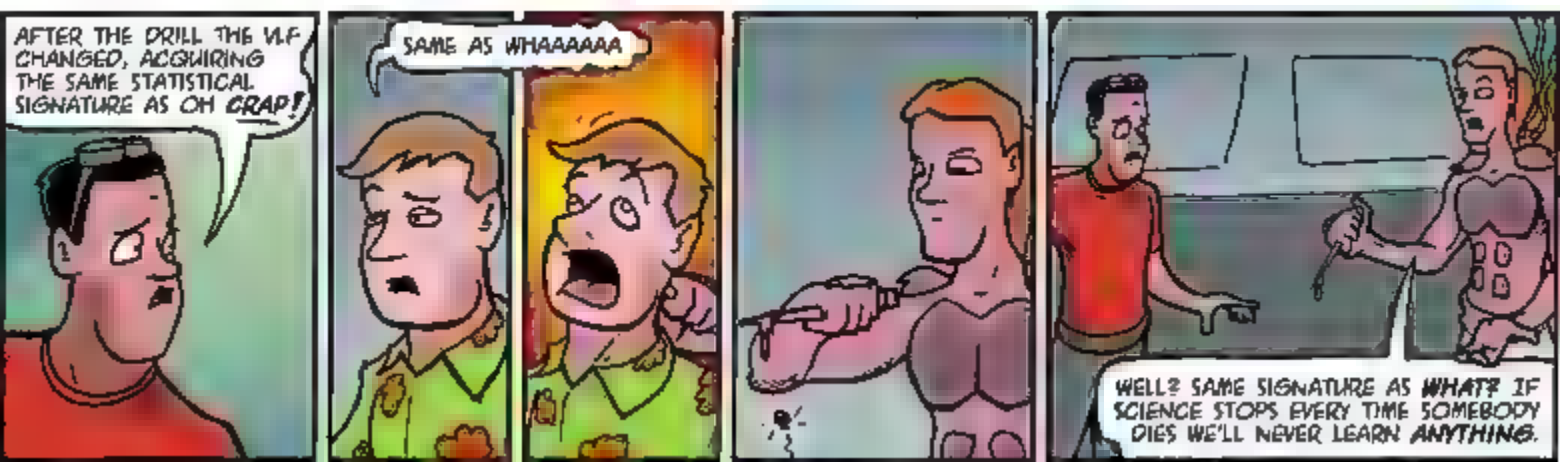

MEDICAL WING, QUARANTINE I
HEY, BINNIE.. HOW ABOUT YOU CLEAN UP THIS GREASY HAND PRINT YOU MADE?
WHAT GREASY HAND PRINT?
OH, THAT HMPH.
HOW ABOUT YOU COME IN HERE AND CLEAN IT UP YOURSELF?
YEAH, LIKE ANY OF US ARE GOING TO FALL FOR THAT OLD
TRICK?
PERVERT
YEAH, YOU'RE PROBABLY RIGHT NOW, STOP ME IF YOU'VE SEEN THIS ONE BEFORE.

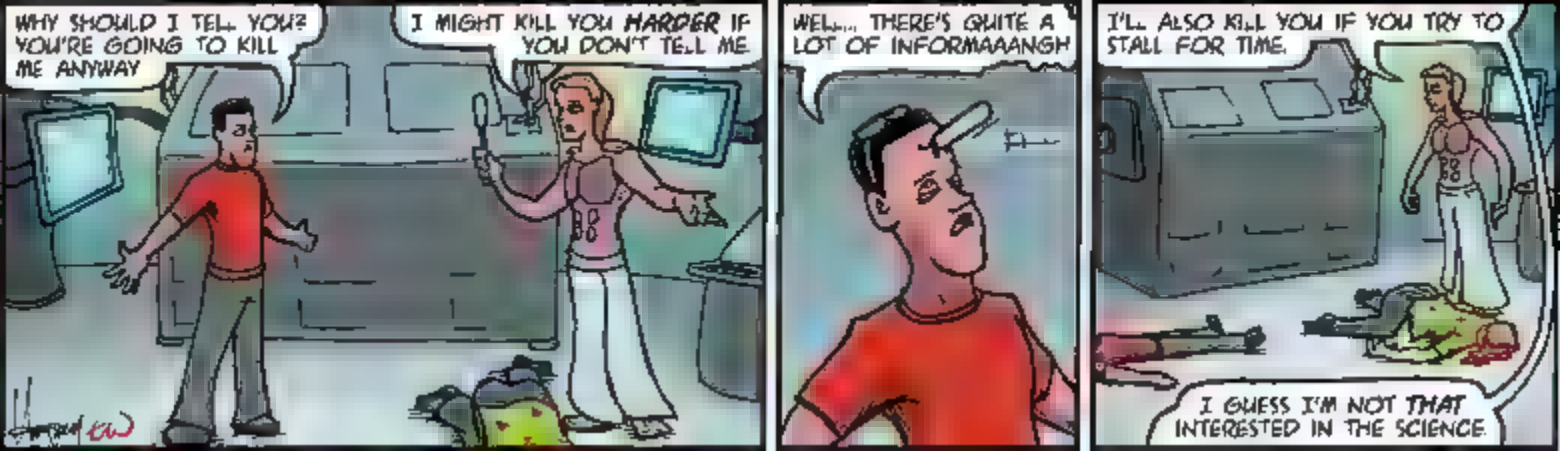

WOW, YOUR HELMETS CLOSED FAST
GET YOUR HAND BACK INSIDE QUARANTINE NOW, OR I WILL "COUGH" SLAG YOU WHERE YOU STAND.
I WONDER IF THEY CLOSED FAST ENOUGH. CARE TO LAY SOME BETS?
OR JUST LAY YOURSELVES OUT TO DIE... THAT'S FINE TOO.

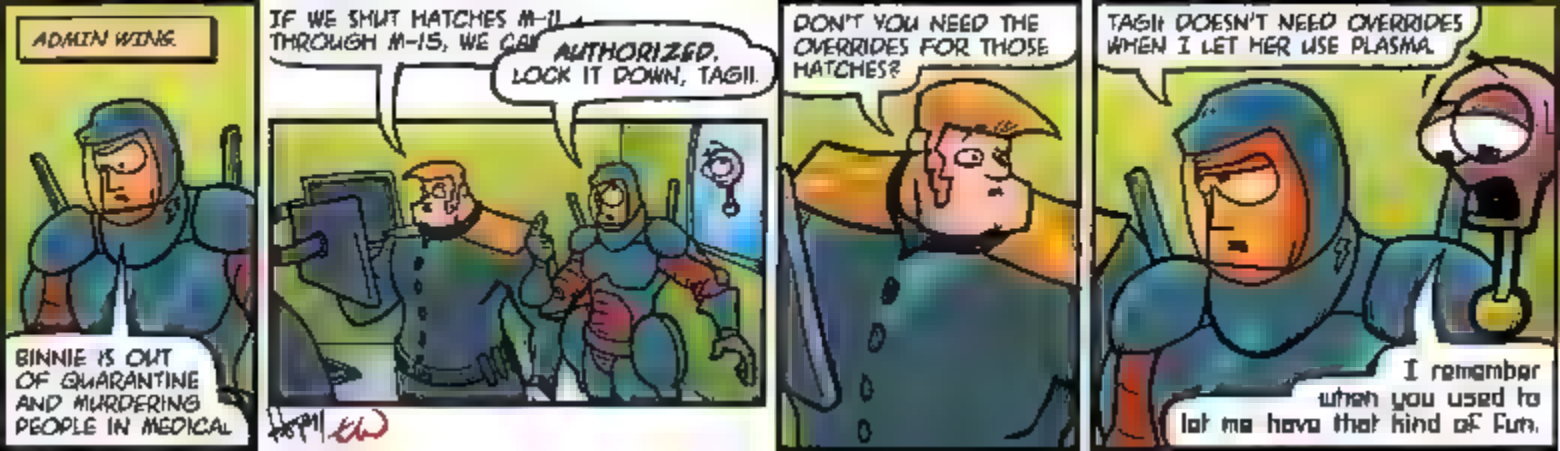

... TRULY APOLOGIZE FOR THE DATA LOSS. YOU HAVE MY
WHA-?
ADMIN WING
STOW THE HELMET, TAGON. I'M NOT GOING TO PUNCH YOU IN THE NOSE.
IT DEPLOYED AUTOMATICALLY.
DO I NEED TO BE WORRIED?
... NO.
GOOD NOW I CAN
YOU NEED TO BE PUTTING ON A HARDSUIT AND RUNNING. WE'RE UNDER ATTACK.

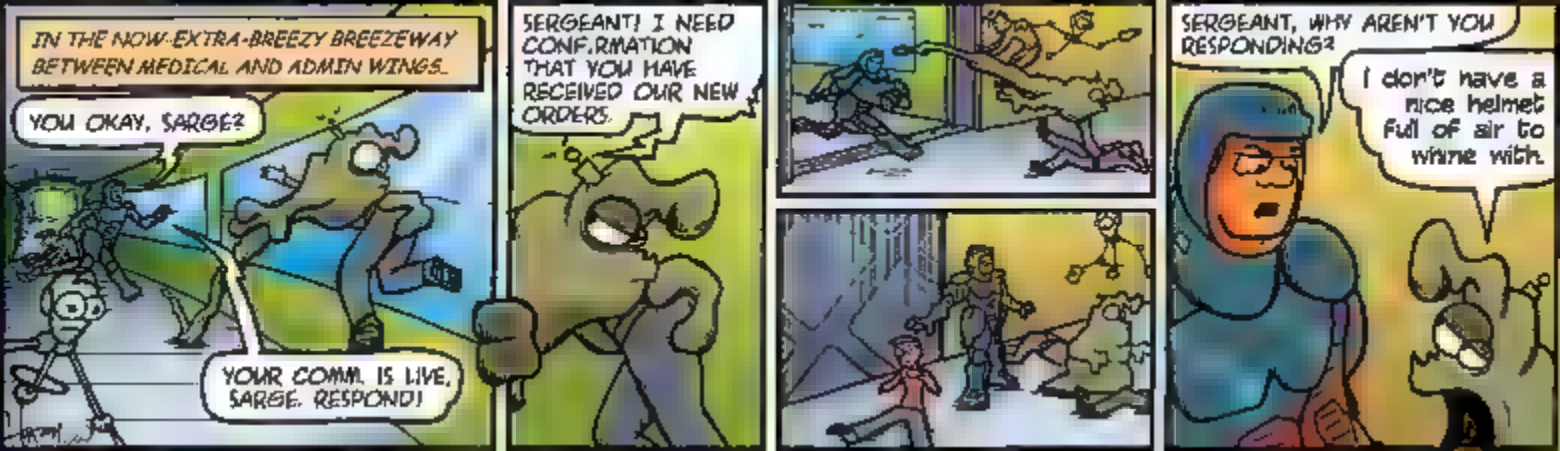

OISRI DIG BASE MEDICAL WING, LAB FOUR
GAHH! THAT STUPID FIRE-DRILL SCREWED EVERYTHING UP!
NONE OF THESE NUMBERS MATCH!
BEFORE TAGH FRITZED THE TV OUR BLOOD NANNIES WERE ON A STEADY CYCLE
NOW THEY'RE SCRAMBLING MADLY
I CAN'T TELL IF OUR PROXIMITY TO THE TV, OUR MENTAL STATE, OR THE PROGRAMMING WE SELECTED HAVE ANY BEARING AT ALL ON WHAT THE NANNIES DO.

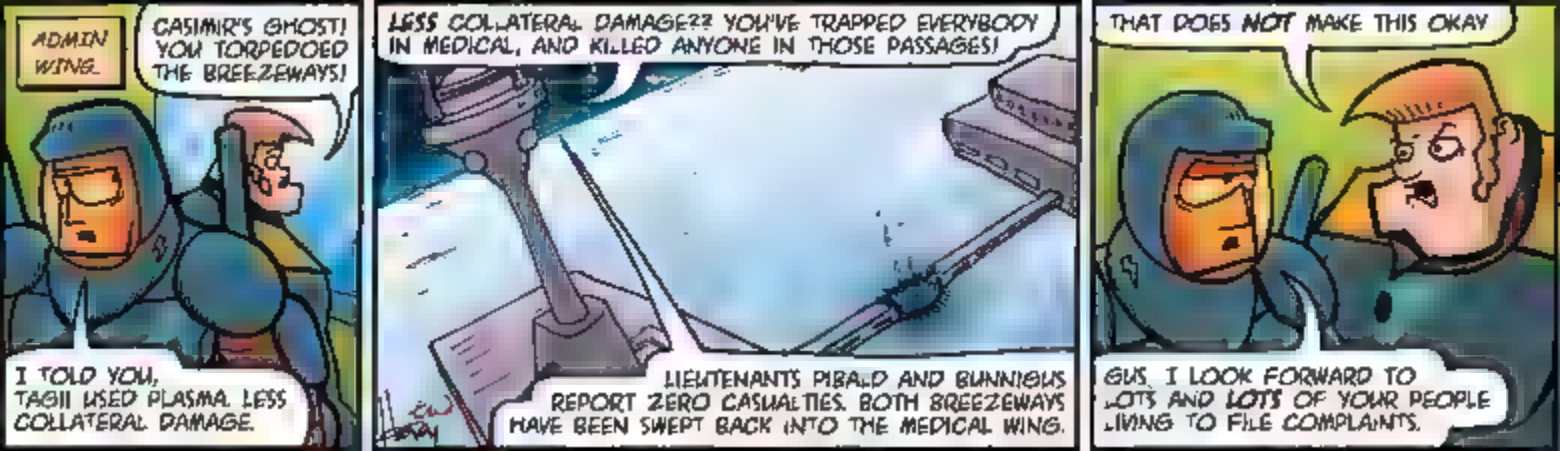

WE'VE STILL GOT PILES OF DATA TO WORK WITH. LOOK HERE, SCANNER FOUR PICKED UP SOME LOW-ENERGY VLF OFF THE TV.
BUT THAT DRILL RUINED OUR BASELINE. CRUNCHING DATA SETS WITH NO HYPOTHESIS, NO CONTROL GROUP... THAT'S NOT SCIENCE. THAT'S ECONOMICS.
I DON'T KNOW. THE VLF SIGNALS BEFORE THE DRILL, CORRESPONDING TO STEADY NANNY ACTIVITY, RESEMBLE AN ENCRYPTED DATASET

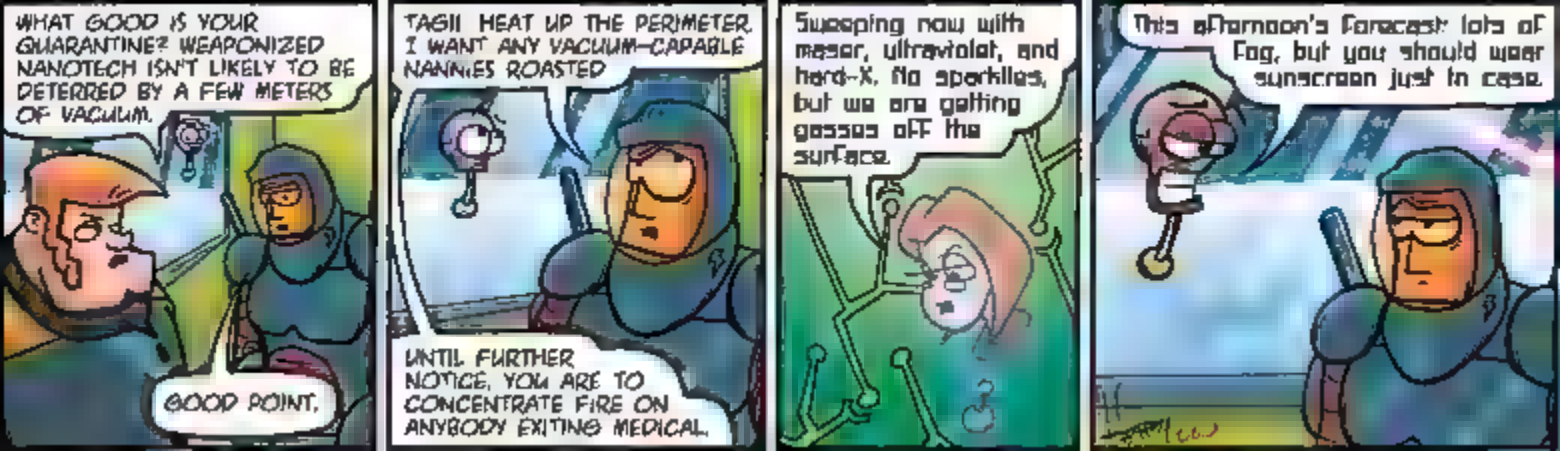

AFTER THE DRILL THE VLF CHANGED, ACQUIRING THE SAME STATISTICAL SIGNATURE AS OH CRAP!
SAME AS WHAAAAAA
WELL? SAME SIGNATURE AS WHAT? IF SCIENCE STOPS EVERY TIME SOMEBODY DIES WE'LL NEVER LEARN ANYTHING.

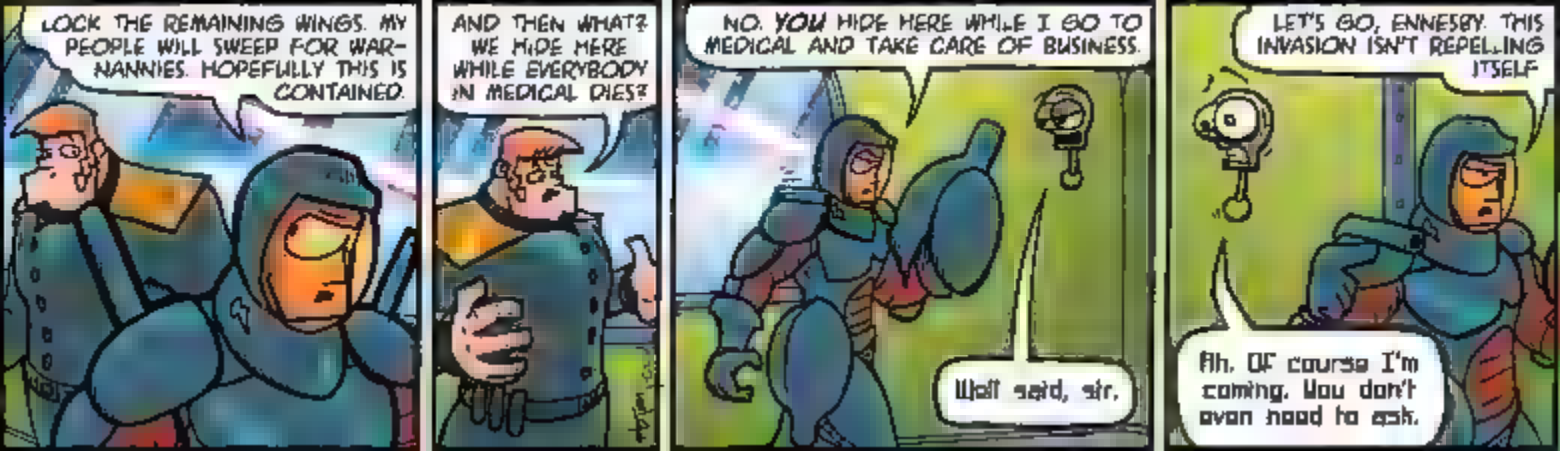

WHY SHOULD I TELL YOU? YOU'RE GOING TO KILL ME ANYWAY
I MIGHT KILL YOU HARDER IF YOU DON'T TELL ME
WEL... THERE'S QUITE A LOT OF INFORMAAANGH
I'LL ALSO KILL YOU IF YOU TRY TO STALL FOR TIME.
I GUESS I'M NOT THAT INTERESTED IN THE SCIENCE


ADMIN WING.
BINNIE IS OUT OF QUARANTINE AND MURDERING PEOPLE IN MEDICAL
IF WE SHUT HATCHES M-11 THROUGH M-15, WE CAN
AUTHORIZED. LOCK IT DOWN, TAG!!.
DON'T YOU NEED THE OVERRIDES FOR THOSE HATCHES?
TAG!! DOESN'T NEED OVERRIDES WHEN I LET HER USE PLASMA.
I remember when you used to let me have that kind of fun.


IN THE NOW-EXTRA-BREEZY BREEZEWAY BETWEEN MEDICAL AND ADMIN WINGS.
YOU OKAY, SARGE?
YOUR COMM. IS LIVE, SARGE. RESPOND!
SERGEANT! I NEED CONFIRMATION THAT YOU HAVE RECEIVED OUR NEW ORDERS.
SERGEANT, WHY AREN'T YOU RESPONDING?
I don't have a nice helmet full of air to whine with.


ADMIN WING.
CASIMIR'S GHOST! YOU TORPEDOED THE BREEZEWAYS!
I TOLD YOU, TAGII USED PLASMA. LESS COLLATERAL DAMAGE.
LESS COLLATERAL DAMAGE?? YOU'VE TRAPPED EVERYBODY IN MEDICAL, AND KILLED ANYONE IN THOSE PASSAGES!
LIEUTENANTS PIBALD AND BUNNIOUS REPORT ZERO CASUALTIES. BOTH BREEZEWAYS HAVE BEEN SWEPT BACK INTO THE MEDICAL WING.
THAT DOES NOT MAKE THIS OKAY
GUS, I LOOK FORWARD TO LOTS AND LOTS OF YOUR PEOPLE LIVING TO FILE COMPLAINTS.

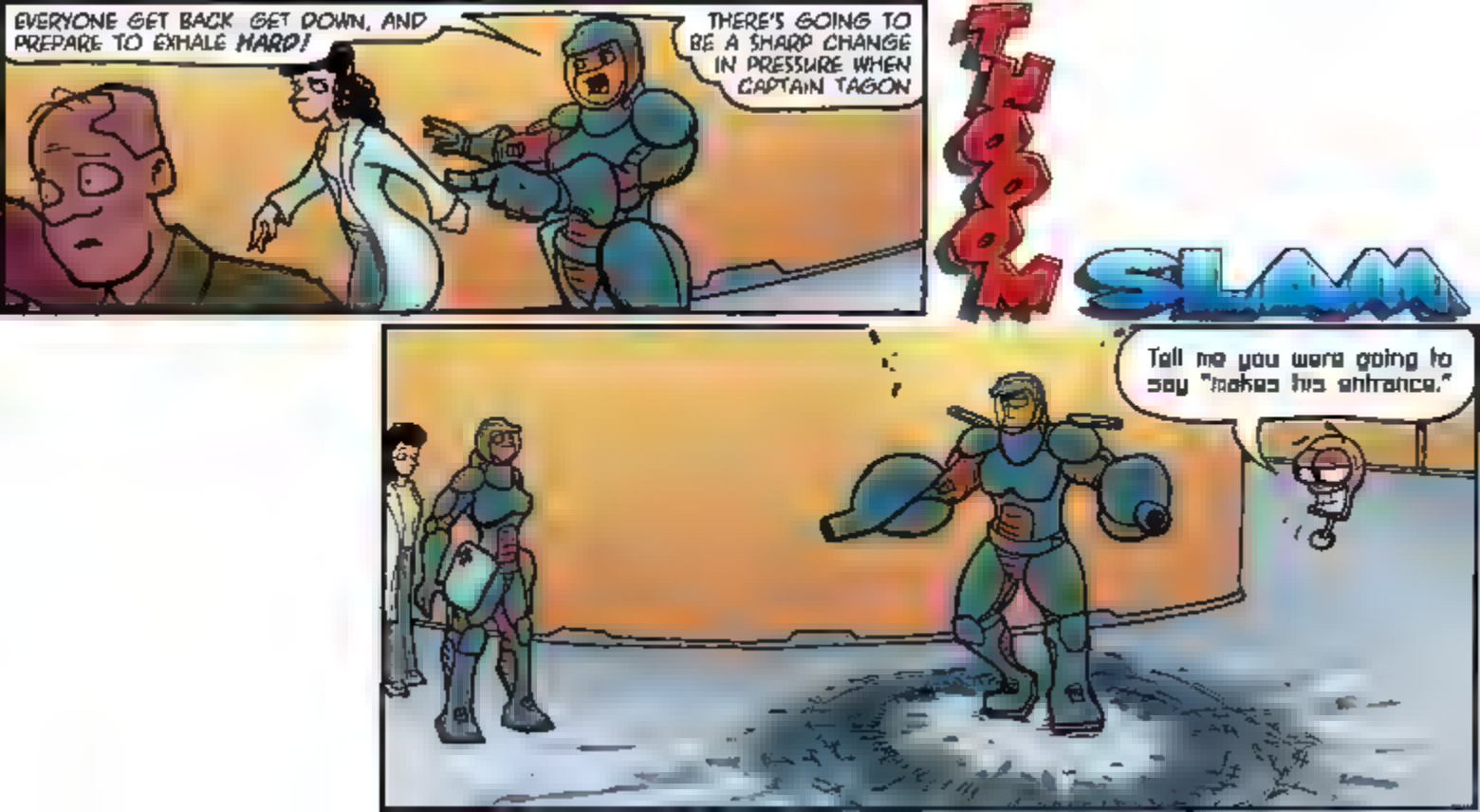

WHAT GOOD IS YOUR QUARANTINE? WEAPONIZED NANOTECH ISN'T LIKELY TO BE DETERRED BY A FEW METERS OF VACUUM.
GOOD POINT.
TAGII HEAT UP THE PERIMETER. I WANT ANY VACUUM-CAPABLE NANNIES ROASTED
UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE, YOU ARE TO CONCENTRATE FIRE ON ANYBODY EXITING MEDICAL.
Sweeping now with maser, ultraviolet, and hard-X. No sparkles, but we are getting gasses off the surface.
This afternoon's forecast: lots of fog, but you should wear sunscreen just in case.


LOCK THE REMAINING WINGS. MY PEOPLE WILL SWEEP FOR WAR-NANNIES. HOPEFULLY THIS IS CONTAINED.
AND THEN WHAT? WE HIDE HERE WHILE EVERYBODY IN MEDICAL DIES?
NO. YOU HIDE HERE WHILE I GO TO MEDICAL AND TAKE CARE OF BUSINESS.
Well said, sir.
LET'S GO, ENNESBY. THIS INVASION ISN'T REPELLING ITSELF
Ah. Of course I'm coming. You don't even need to ask.


TAGH. PICK AN ENTRY POINT FOR ME. I WANT TO BE BETWEEN THE HOSTILE AND THE FRIENDLIES
Picked and painted.
I SEE IT. ON MY APPROACH PUNCH A TWO-METER HOLE, WAIT FOR ME AND ENNESBY TO CLEAR, THEN SLAP A HULL PATCH ON IT
Patch launched. Forty-five seconds to slap.


I'LL WAIT THIRTY. LET'S SEE HOW LITTLE AIR WE CAN LET OUT
Have you gone up against weaponized nannies before, sir?
JUST ONCE.
You lived to tell about it, so I guess you won?

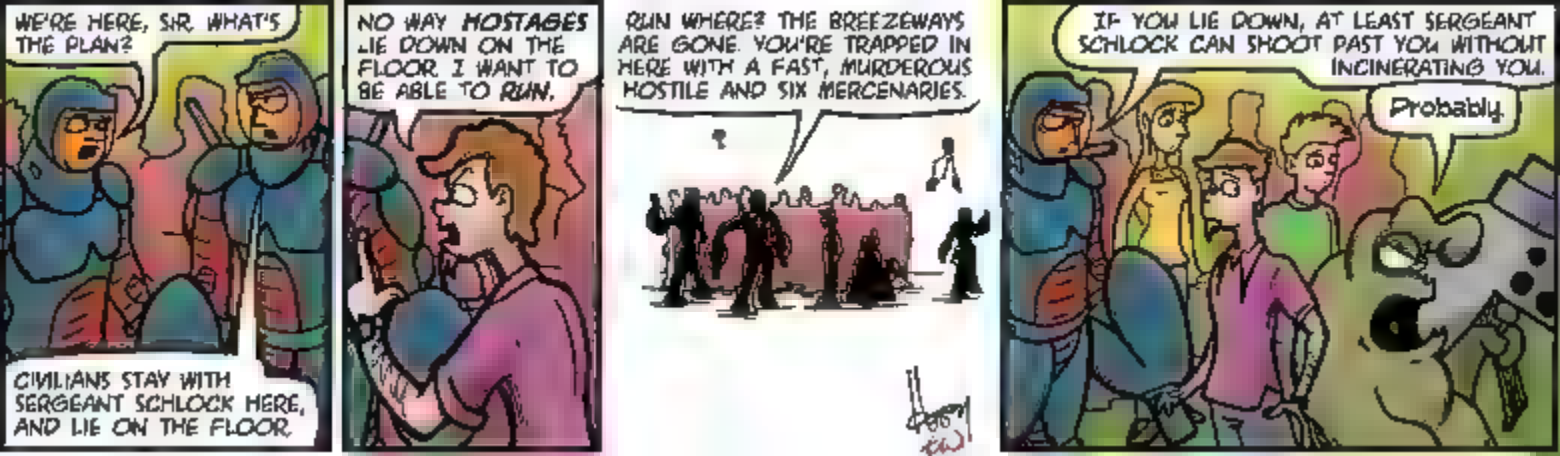

I HAVEN'T TOLD ANYBODY ABOUT IT BECAUSE WE DIDN'T WIN.
Oh.

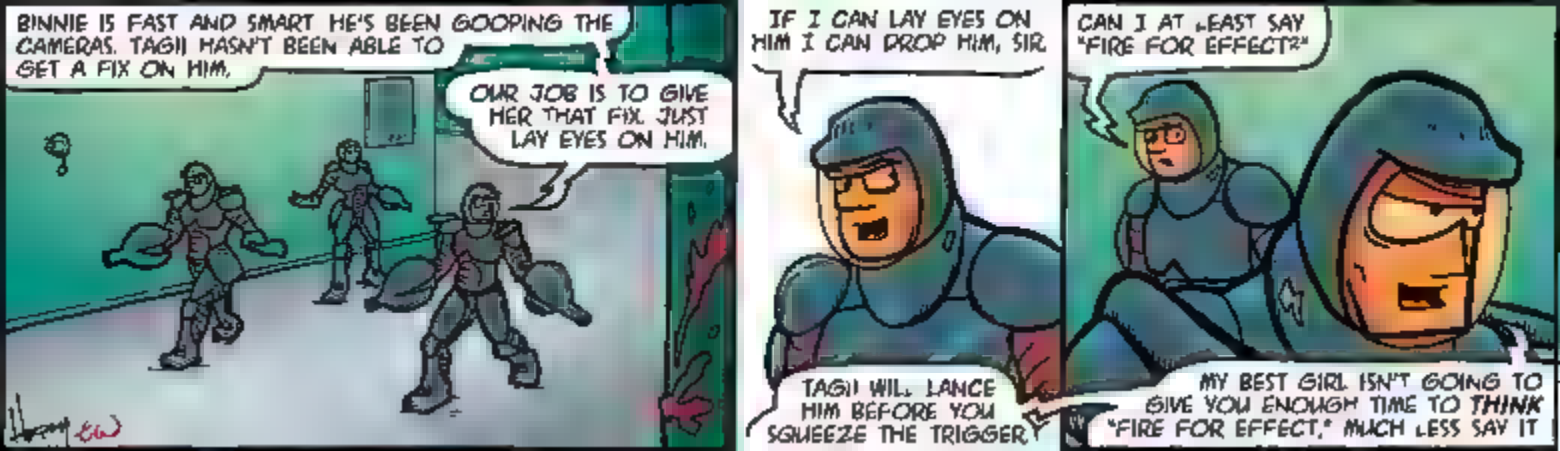

EVERYONE GET BACK GET DOWN, AND PREPARE TO EXHALE HARD!
THERE'S GOING TO BE A SHARP CHANGE IN PRESSURE WHEN CAPTAIN TAGON
TAGON
SLAM
Tell me you were going to say "makes his entrance."

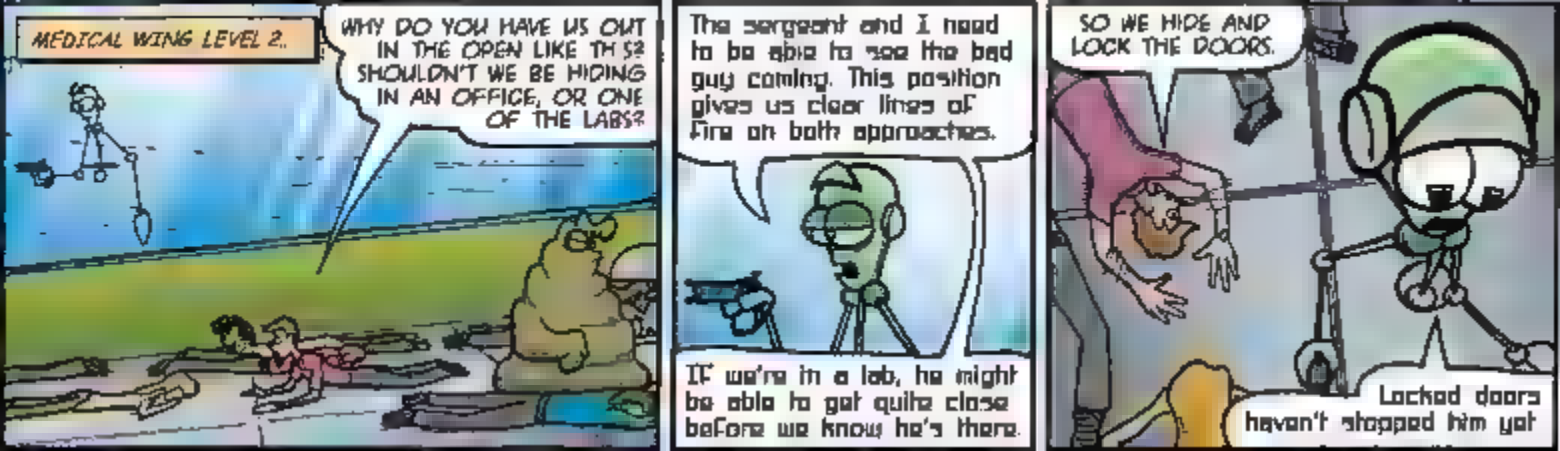

MEDICAL WING, LEVEL 1.
WE'VE GOT FOUR DOWN HERE, SIR.
WE'VE GOT EIGHT.
IF YOU WANT TO REGROUP, IT MAKES MORE SENSE FOR US TO COME TO YOU.
THE ELEVATOR IS PROBABLY A DEATH TRAP.
SCHLOCK COULD CUT THROUGH THE CEILING. THAT PUTS US ONE JUMP AWAY FROM LINE OF SIGHT TO YOU.
MAKE IT HAPPEN.
So what's the word from the secret officers-only channel?
TODAY'S YOUR LUCKY DAY

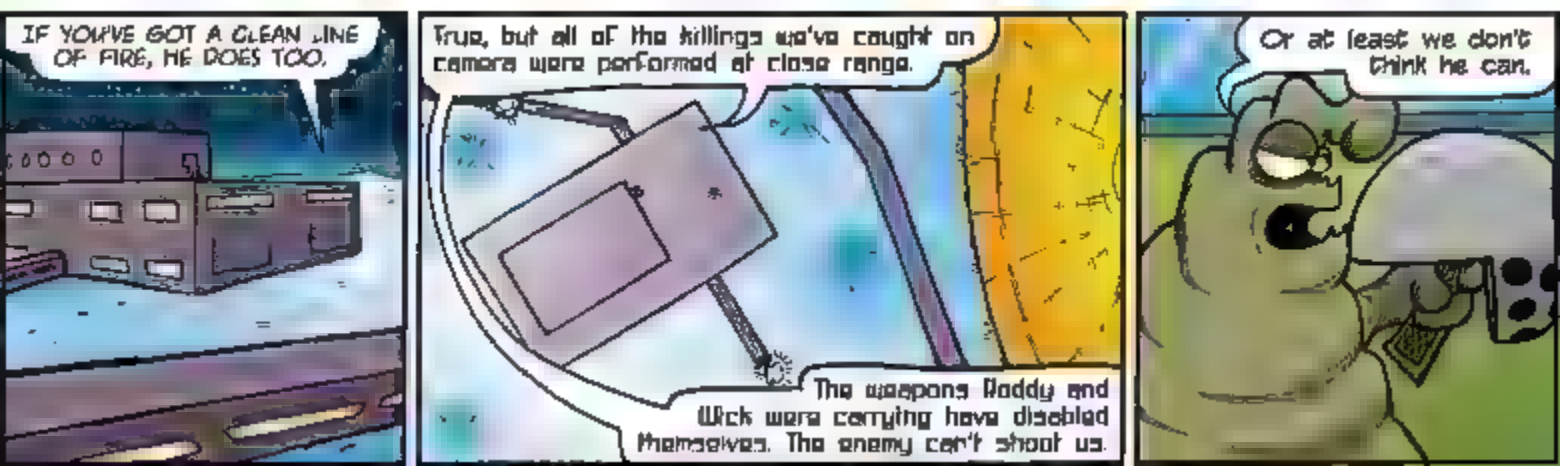

ONE CAREFULLY-TRACED "THOOOM" LATER.
Okay, time to go up!
LET GO! I'M NOT RIDING WITH YOU AGAIN!
YOU'RE BOUNCY, NAUSEATING AND
WAAUUUGH!
And I wasn't offering a ride this time.

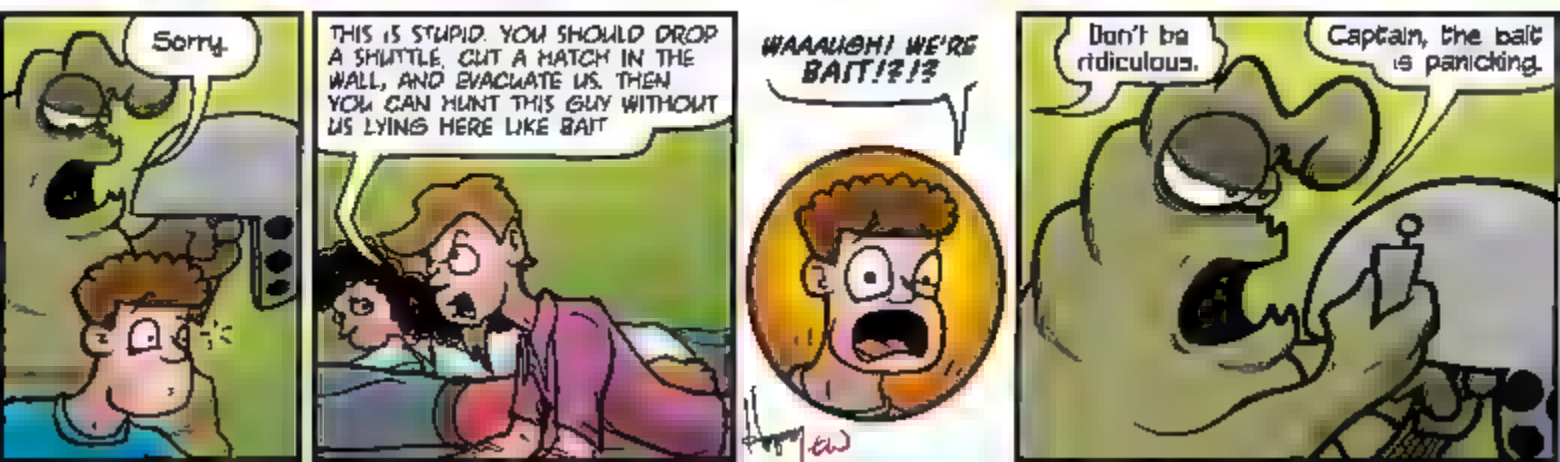

Move, move, move!
WHAT IS GOING ON? THE BREEZE-WAY BLEW UP, YOU BLASTED THE CEILING, AND NOW WE'RE ALL RUNNING.
IS THIS PART OF THAT STUPID DRILL?
HAH! WE DON'T USUALLY GET TO DO THIS MUCH DAMAGE DURING A DRILL.
OF COURSE, THEY NEVER PUT ME IN CHARGE OF THE DRILLS.

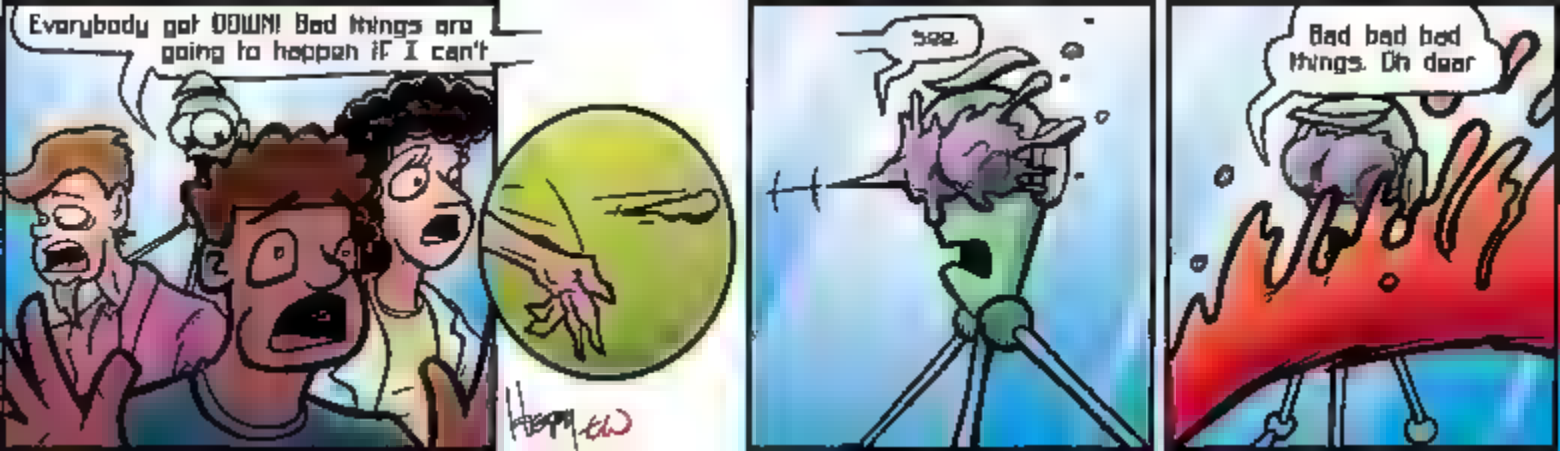

WE'RE HERE, SIR. WHAT'S THE PLAN?
CIVILIANS STAY WITH SERGEANT SCHLOCK HERE, AND LIE ON THE FLOOR.
NO WAY. HOSTAGES LIE DOWN ON THE FLOOR. I WANT TO BE ABLE TO RUN.
RUN WHERE? THE BREEZEWAYS ARE GONE. YOU'RE TRAPPED IN HERE WITH A FAST, MURDEROUS HOSTILE AND SIX MERCENARIES.
IF YOU LIE DOWN, AT LEAST SERGEANT SCHLOCK CAN SHOOT PAST YOU WITHOUT INCINERATING YOU.
Probably.


BINNIE IS FAST AND SMART. HE'S BEEN GOOPING THE CAMERAS. TAGII HASN'T BEEN ABLE TO GET A FIX ON HIM.
OUR JOB IS TO GIVE HER THAT FIX. JUST LAY EYES ON HIM.
IF I CAN LAY EYES ON HIM I CAN DROP HIM, SIR
TAGII WILL LANCE HIM BEFORE YOU SQUEEZE THE TRIGGER
CAN I AT LEAST SAY "FIRE FOR EFFECT?"
MY BEST GIRL ISN'T GOING TO GIVE YOU ENOUGH TIME TO THINK "FIRE FOR EFFECT," MUCH LESS SAY IT


MEDICAL WING LEVEL 2.
WHY DO YOU HAVE US OUT IN THE OPEN LIKE THIS? SHOULDN'T WE BE HIDING IN AN OFFICE, OR ONE OF THE LABS?
The sergeant and I need to be able to see the bad guy coming. This position gives us clear lines of fire on both approaches.
If we're in a lab, he might be able to get quite close before we know he's there.
SO WE HIDE AND LOCK THE DOORS.
Locked doors haven't stopped him yet

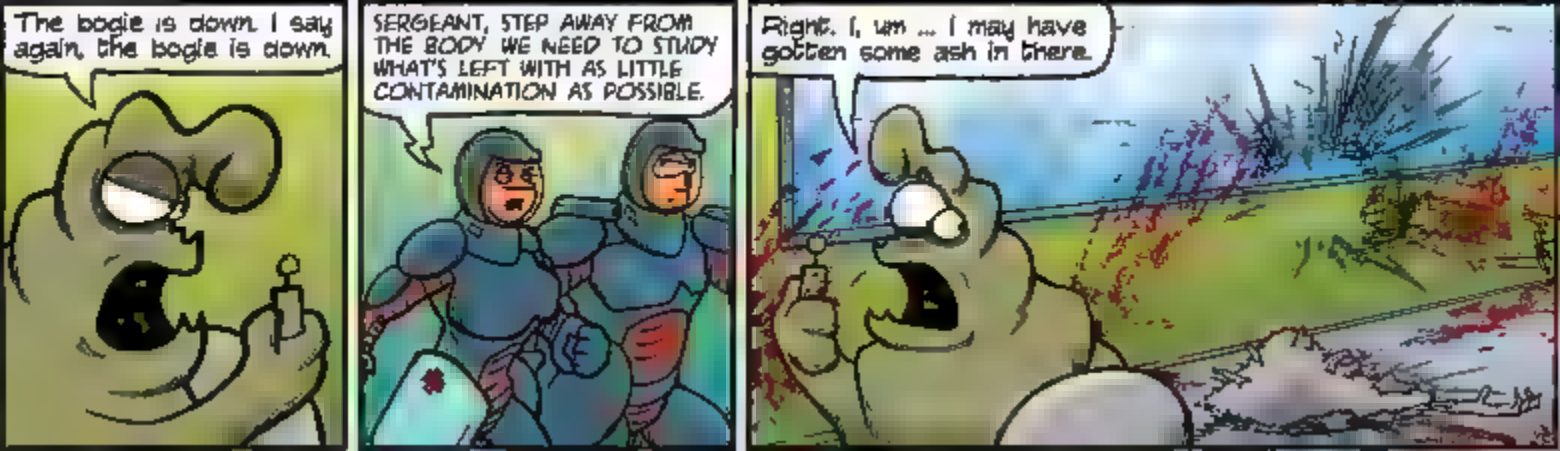

IF YOU'VE GOT A CLEAN LINE OF FIRE, HE DOES TOO.
True, but all of the killings we've caught on camera were performed at close range.
The weapons Daddy and Mick were carrying have disabled themselves. The enemy can't shoot us.
Or at least we don't think he can.


Sorry.
THIS IS STUPID. YOU SHOULD DROP A SHUTTLE, CUT A HATCH IN THE WALL, AND EVACUATE US. THEN YOU CAN HUNT THIS GUY WITHOUT US LYING HERE LIKE BAIT
WAAAUGH! WE'RE BAIT!?!?
Don't be ridiculous.
Captain, the bait is panicking.


Everybody get DOWN! Bad things are going to happen if I can't
See
Bad bad bad things. Oh dear

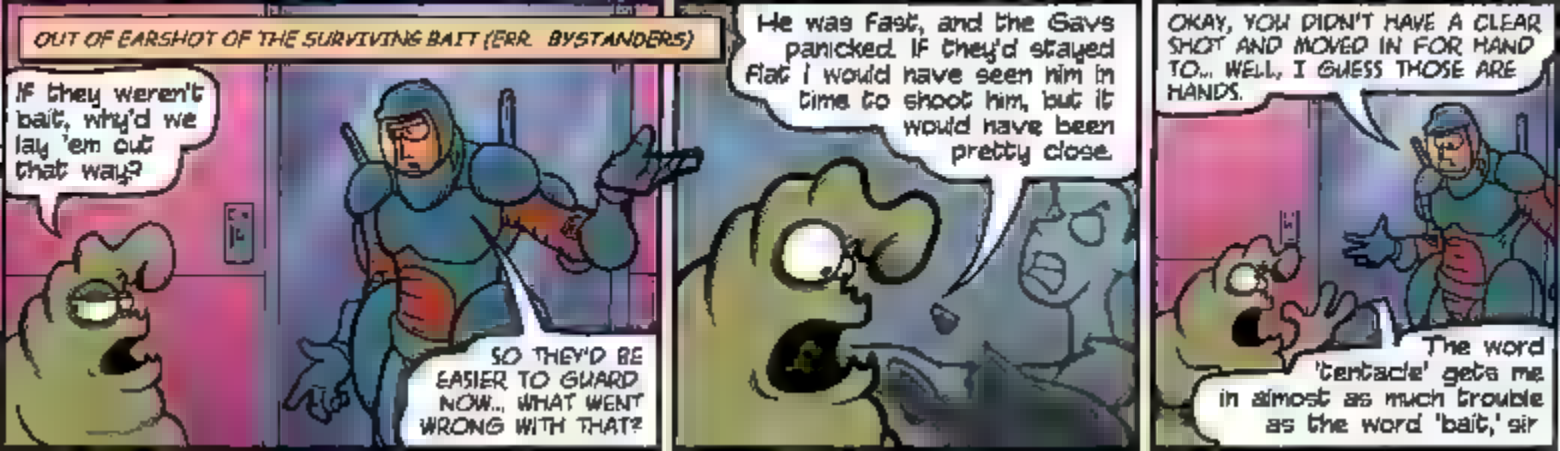

DOCTOR, IS THAT
SHUT UP
HELP ME! I CAN'T
SHUT UP.
I'M JUST A PUPPET!
I'M JUST A PUPPET!
SHUT UP!
Let me help with that.


KEEEAUUUGH!
Hey, ow!
GIVE ME YOUR GUN! WHERE IS IT?
THANK YOU!

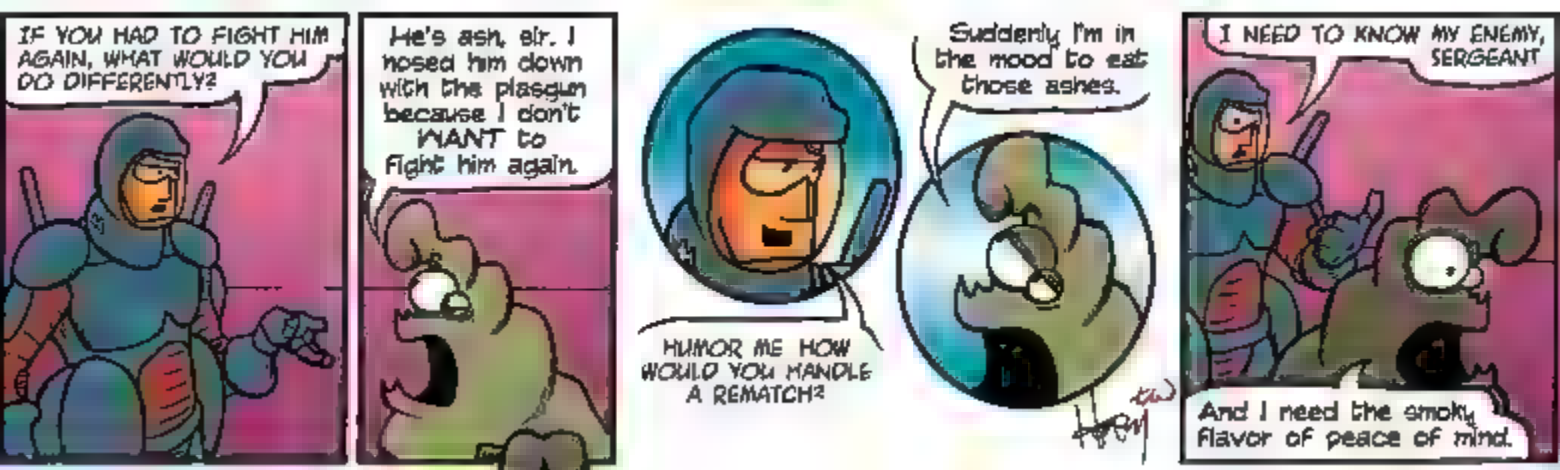

The bogie is down. I say again, the bogie is down.
SERGEANT, STEP AWAY FROM THE BODY. WE NEED TO STUDY WHAT'S LEFT WITH AS LITTLE CONTAMINATION AS POSSIBLE.
Right. I, um ... I may have gotten some ash in there.


Doc, hurry back. We have wounded.
START TRIAGE. I'VE GOT NANNY-BAGS.
I see lots of head trauma.
Lots and lots.
Triage complete. You can... umm.. take your time.
She might not be able to help these folks, but I'm still missing some bits.

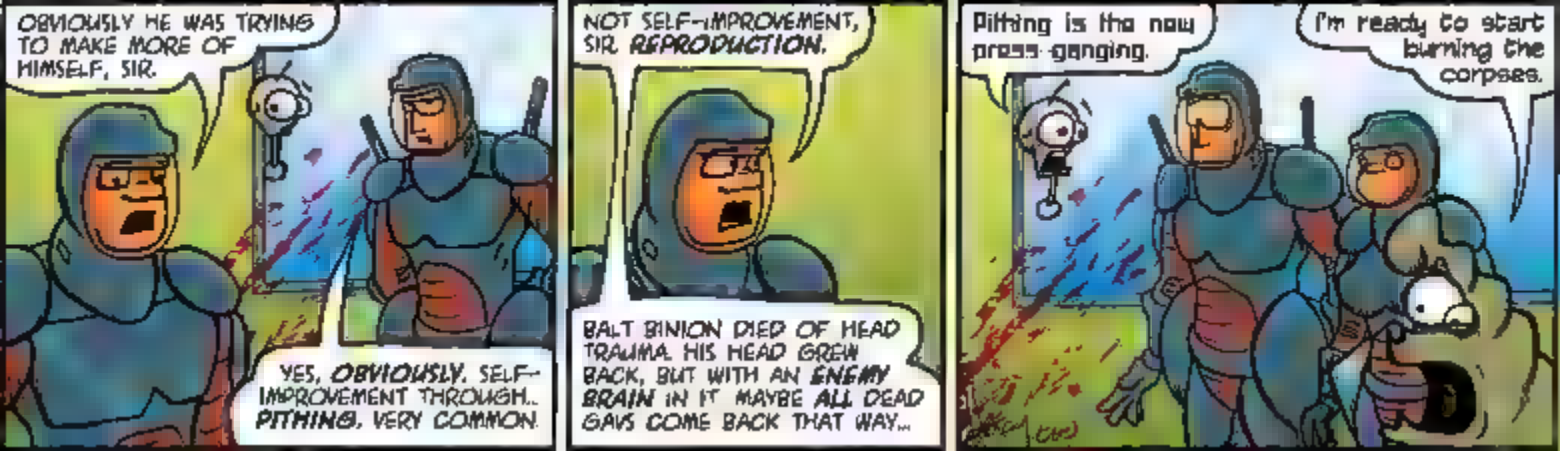

NINE CASUALTIES, THREE SURVIVORS. HOW LONG DID THIS TAKE?
Seven-point-one-one seconds from the moment I was blinded.
He would have killed all of them but they spread out when they panicked.
OF course, IF they hadn't spread out, Sergeant Schlock would have seen him coming.
This is what happens when you don't stake your bait down good and hard.
SERGEANT, UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE YOU ARE NOT TO USE THAT WORD
He means the one beginning with "b" that rhymes with "ale."


OUT OF EARSHOT OF THE SURVIVING BAIT (ERR. BYSTANDERS)
IF they weren't bait, why'd we lay 'em out that way?
SO THEY'D BE EASIER TO GUARD NOW... WHAT WENT WRONG WITH THAT?
He was fast, and the Gavs panicked. If they'd stayed flat I would have seen him in time to shoot him, but it would have been pretty close.
OKAY, YOU DIDN'T HAVE A CLEAR SHOT AND MOVED IN FOR HAND TO... WELL, I GUESS THOSE ARE HANDS.
The word 'tentacle' gets me in almost as much trouble as the word 'bait,' sir

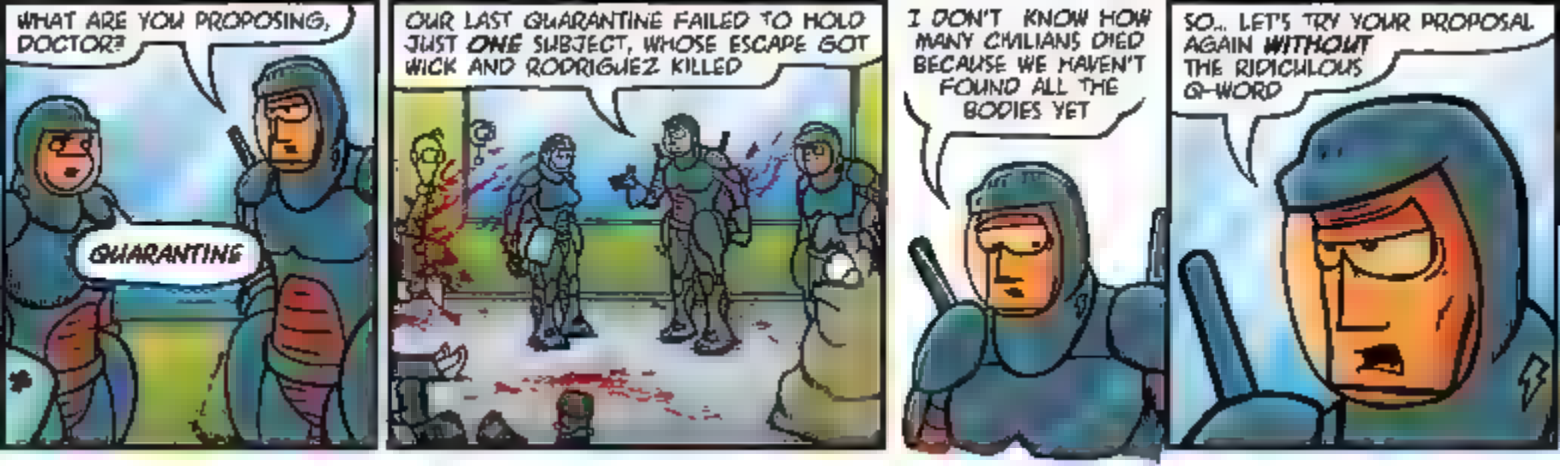

HAND TO HAND IT IS, THEN. REPORT
Well, he was really strong. Ripped a chunk right out of me.
I'VE SEEN YOU GET SPLATTERED BEFORE YOU'RE SQUISHY.
Not when I'm flexing, but he still ripped right through the limb I was going to crush him with.
I'm just glad I didn't try to eat him. He would have torn me some new holes, and taken my plasgun with him on his way out.

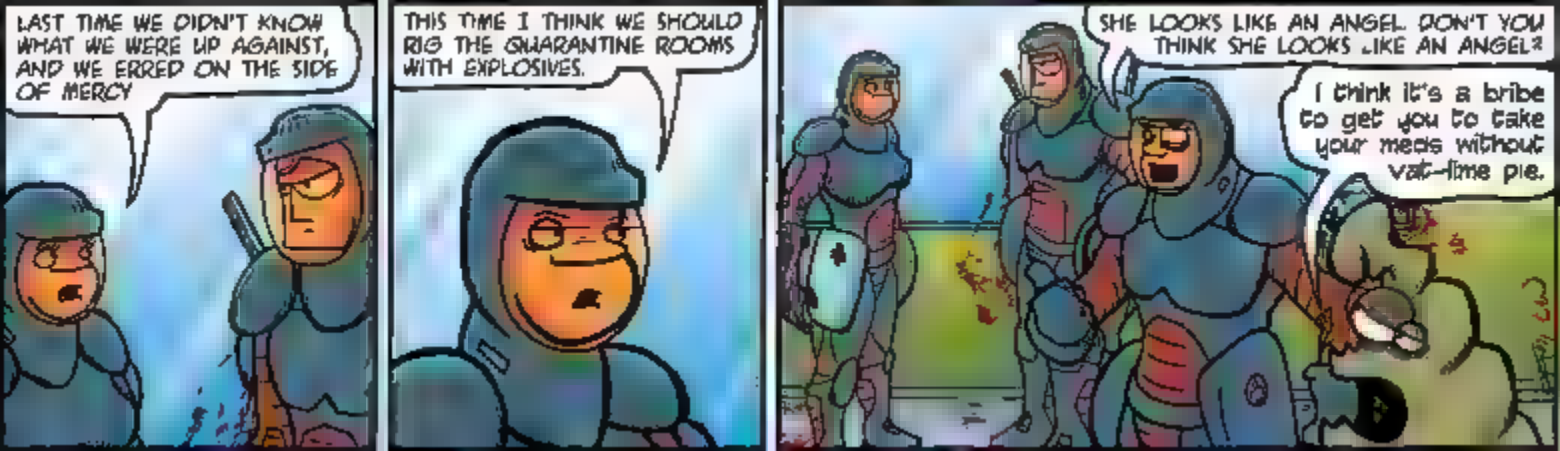

IF YOU HAD TO FIGHT HIM AGAIN, WHAT WOULD YOU DO DIFFERENTLY?
He's ash, sir. I nosed him down with the plasgun because I don't WANT to fight him again.
HUMOR ME. HOW WOULD YOU HANDLE A REMATCH?
Suddenly I'm in the mood to eat those ashes.
I NEED TO KNOW MY ENEMY, SERGEANT
And I need the smoky flavor of peace of mind.

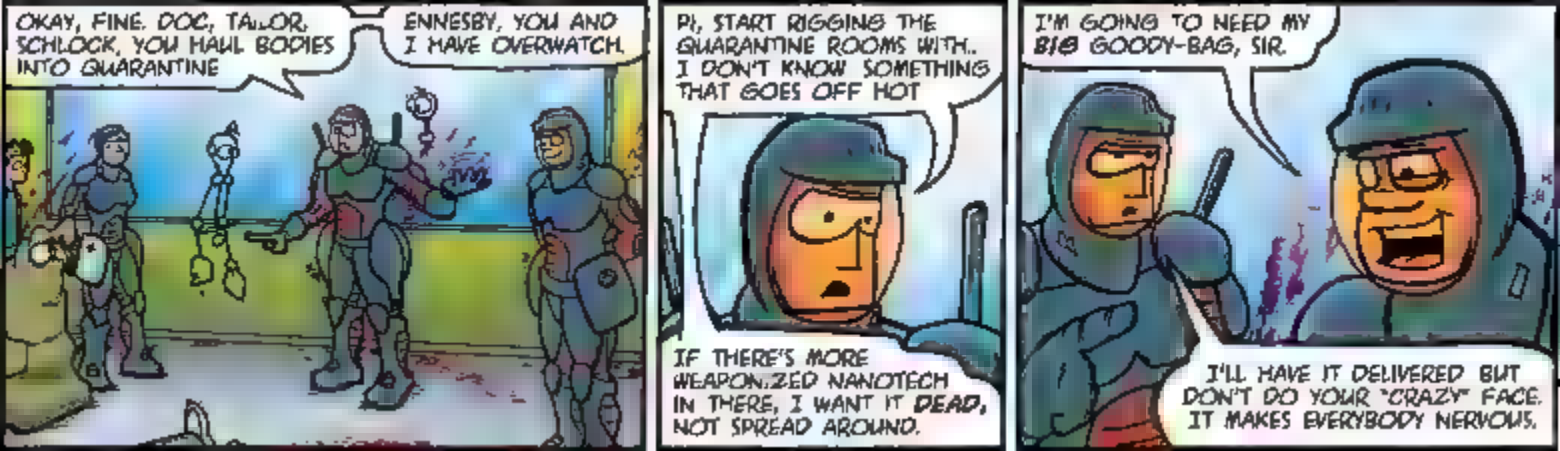

WELL, DOCTOR? WHAT ARE WE UP AGAINST?
A HEAD FETISH?
HE INFLICTED A FEW INCAPACITATING WOUNDS BUT HE KILLED ALL OF HIS VICTIMS WITH BLOWS TO THE HEAD.
WHY?
YOU'RE THE EXPERT SOLDIER, SIR. YOU TELL ME
MAYBE HE THOUGHT THEY WERE WEARING BODY ARMOR?
Maybe he thought he was playing one of those games where headshots score better.


OBVIOUSLY HE WAS TRYING TO MAKE MORE OF HIMSELF, SIR.
YES, OBVIOUSLY. SELF-IMPROVEMENT THROUGH... PITHING. VERY COMMON.
NOT SELF-IMPROVEMENT, SIR. REPRODUCTION.
BALT BINION DIED OF HEAD TRAUMA. HIS HEAD GREW BACK, BUT WITH AN ENEMY BRAIN IN IT. MAYBE ALL DEAD GAVS COME BACK THAT WAY...
Pithing is the new press-ganging.
I'm ready to start burning the corpses.


CAPTAIN, PI MAY BE RIGHT. THESE PEOPLE COULD RISE FROM DEATH AS ENEMY SUPER SOLDIERS.
OKAY, THEN. SERGEANT, IT'S TIME TO LIGHT 'EM UP
Sir, she's making that one face.
WHICH FACE? I MISSED IT
BUT UNTIL I CAN PROVE IT, BURNING THE CORPSES WOULD BE A LOT LIKE MURDER.
It's the face she uses when she takes away my gun.
AH. THAT FACE.

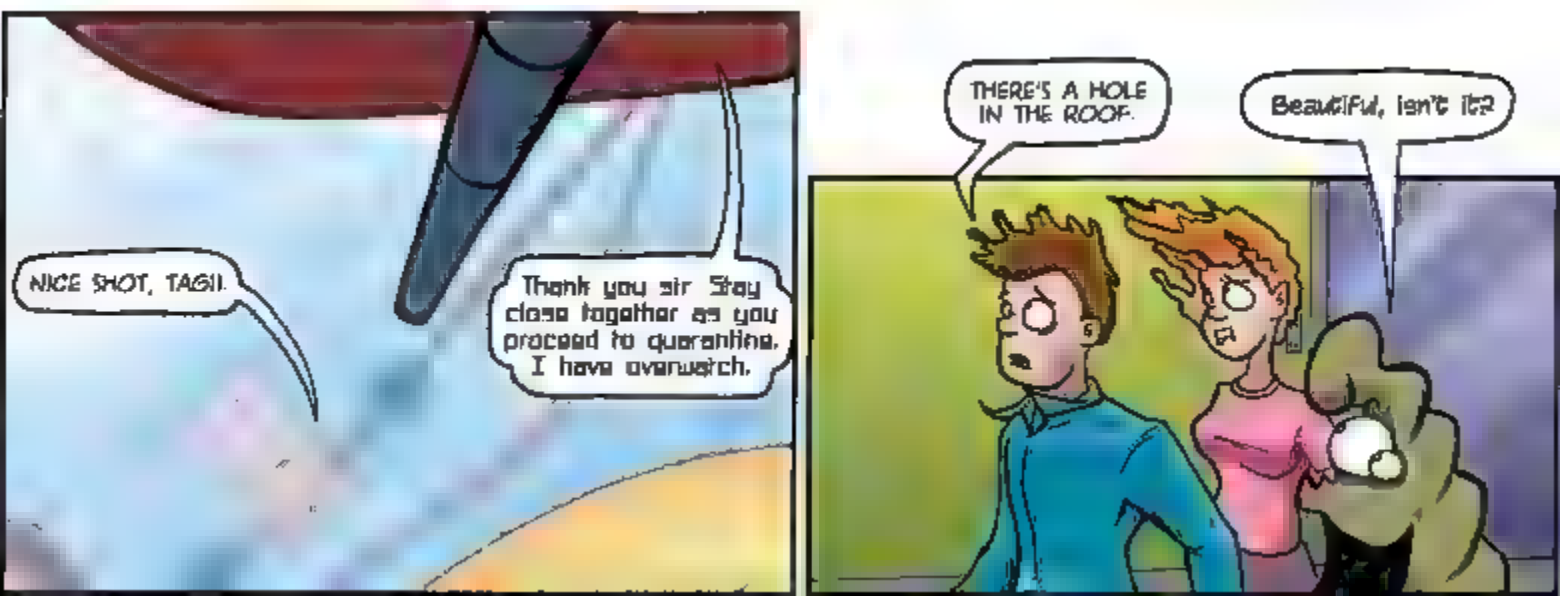

WHAT ARE YOU PROPOSING, DOCTOR?
QUARANTINE
OUR LAST QUARANTINE FAILED TO HOLD JUST ONE SUBJECT, WHOSE ESCAPE GOT WICK AND RODRIGUEZ KILLED
I DON'T KNOW HOW MANY CHILIANS DIED BECAUSE WE HAVEN'T FOUND ALL THE BODIES YET
SO... LET'S TRY YOUR PROPOSAL AGAIN WITHOUT THE RIDICULOUS Q-WORD

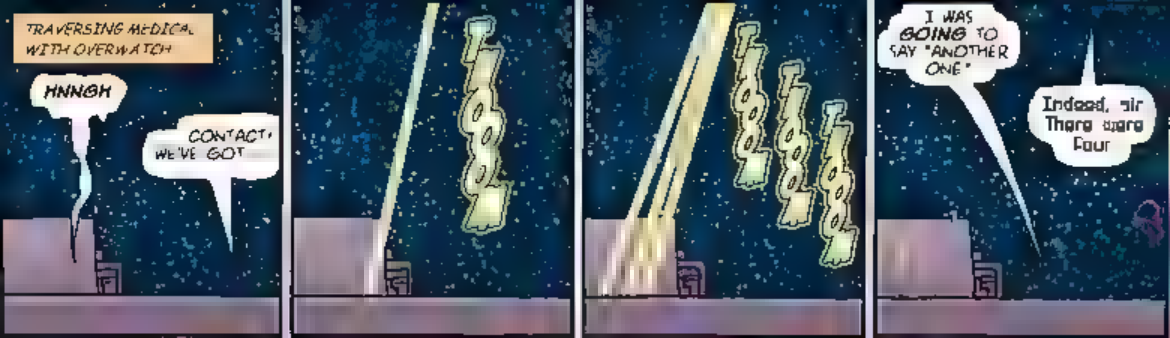

LAST TIME WE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WE WERE UP AGAINST, AND WE ERRED ON THE SIDE OF MERCY
THIS TIME I THINK WE SHOULD RIG THE QUARANTINE ROOMS WITH EXPLOSIVES.
SHE LOOKS LIKE AN ANGEL. DON'T YOU THINK SHE LOOKS LIKE AN ANGEL?
I think it's a bribe to get you to take your meds without vat-lime pie.

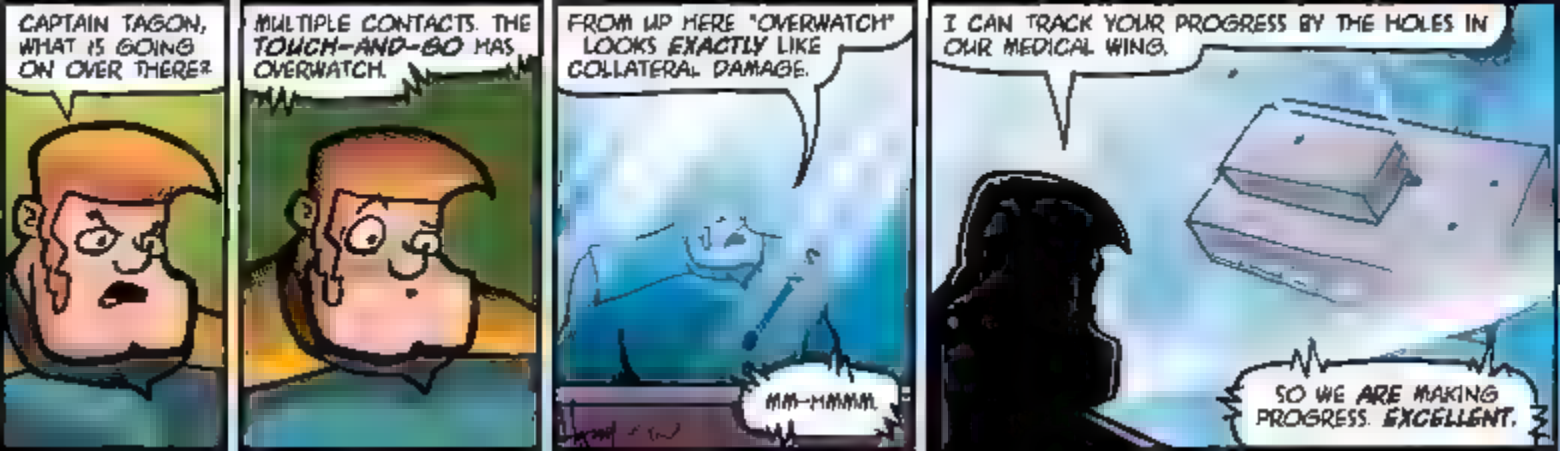

OKAY, FINE. DOC, TAYLOR, SCHLOCK, YOU HAUL BODIES INTO QUARANTINE
ENNESBY, YOU AND I HAVE OVERWATCH.
PI, START RIGGING THE QUARANTINE ROOMS WITH.. I DON'T KNOW SOMETHING THAT GOES OFF HOT
IF THERE'S MORE WEAPONIZED NANOTECH IN THERE, I WANT IT DEAD, NOT SPREAD AROUND.
I'M GOING TO NEED MY BIG GOODY-BAG, SIR.
I'LL HAVE IT DELIVERED BUT DON'T DO YOUR "CRAZY" FACE. IT MAKES EVERYBODY NERVOUS.


Sir, the retro-exocephalodorm nannies had Binnie staggering around less than ten minutes after his accident
Binnie's killing spree began sixteen minutes ago.
WE MIGHT ALREADY HAVE FRESH ENEMIES IN HERE WITH US.
Exactly. I think we should escort our three civilian survivors to quarantine now.
QUARANTINE? HOW ABOUT A SHUTTLE OFF-WORLD INSTEAD? THERE'S NO WAY YOU'RE LOCKING ME UP WITH THE CORPSES OF MY FRIENDS.

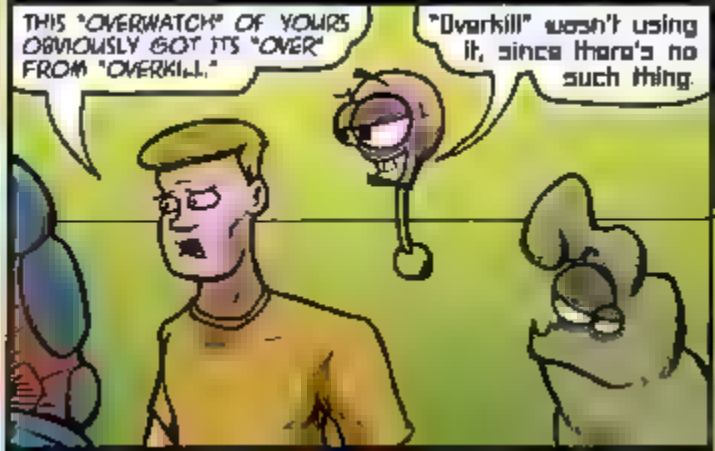

GNNAAAARGHLBPHT!

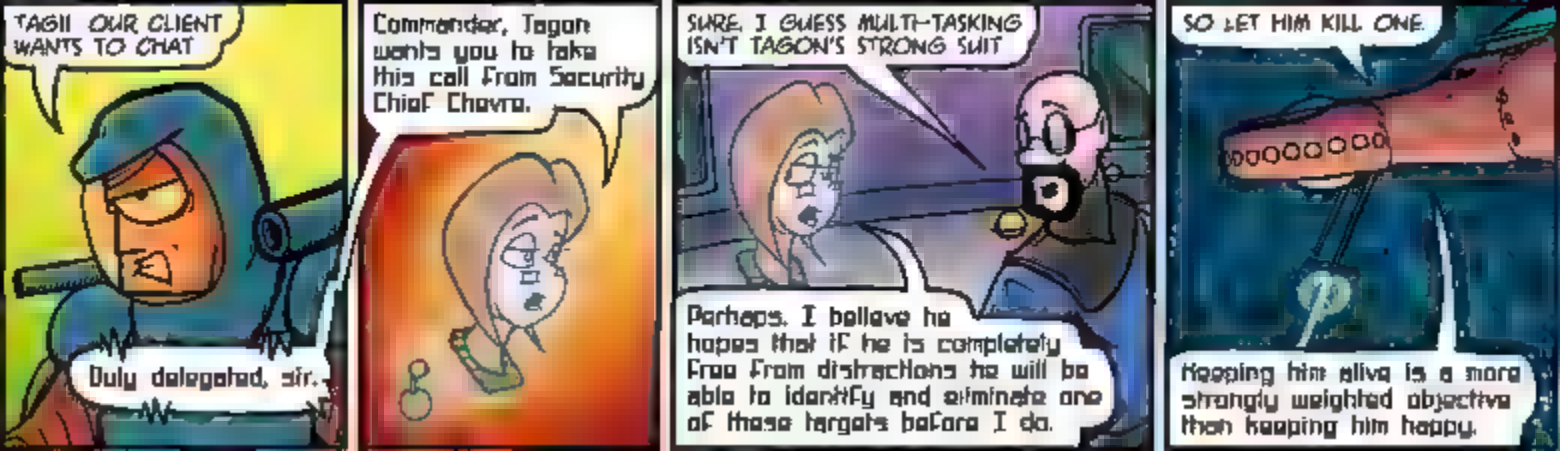

NICE SHOT, TAG!!
Thank you sir. Stay close together as you proceed to quarantine. I have overwatch.
THERE'S A HOLE IN THE ROOF.
Beautiful, isn't it?

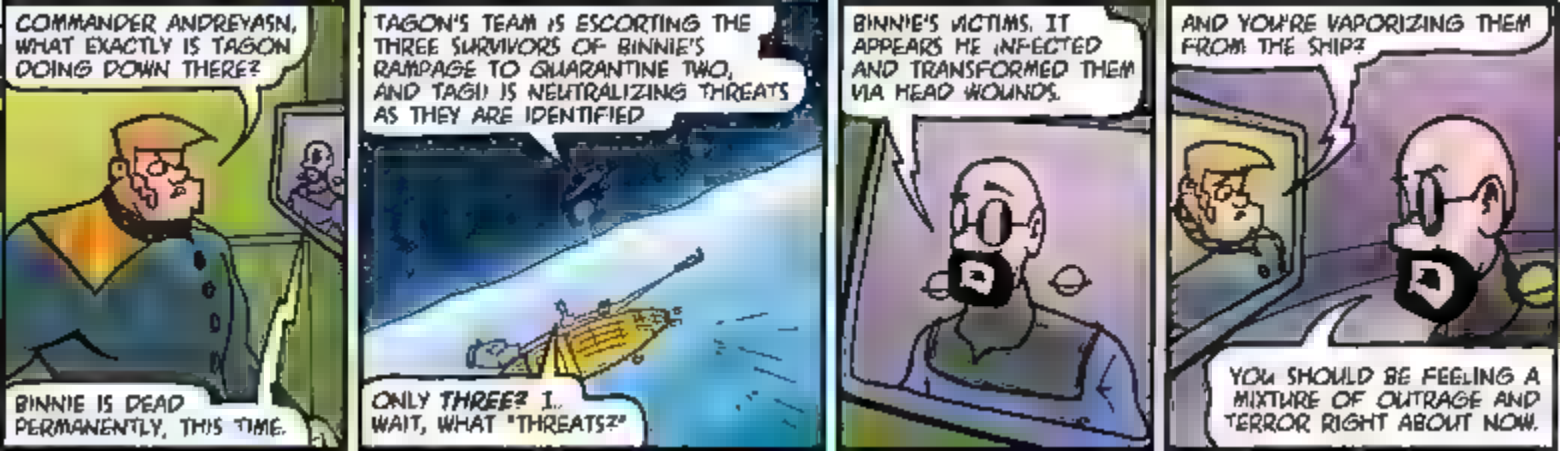

TRAVERSING MEDICAL WITH OVERWATCH
HNNGH
CONTACT, WE'VE GOT
I WAS GOING TO SAY "ANOTHER ONE"
Indeed, sir There were four

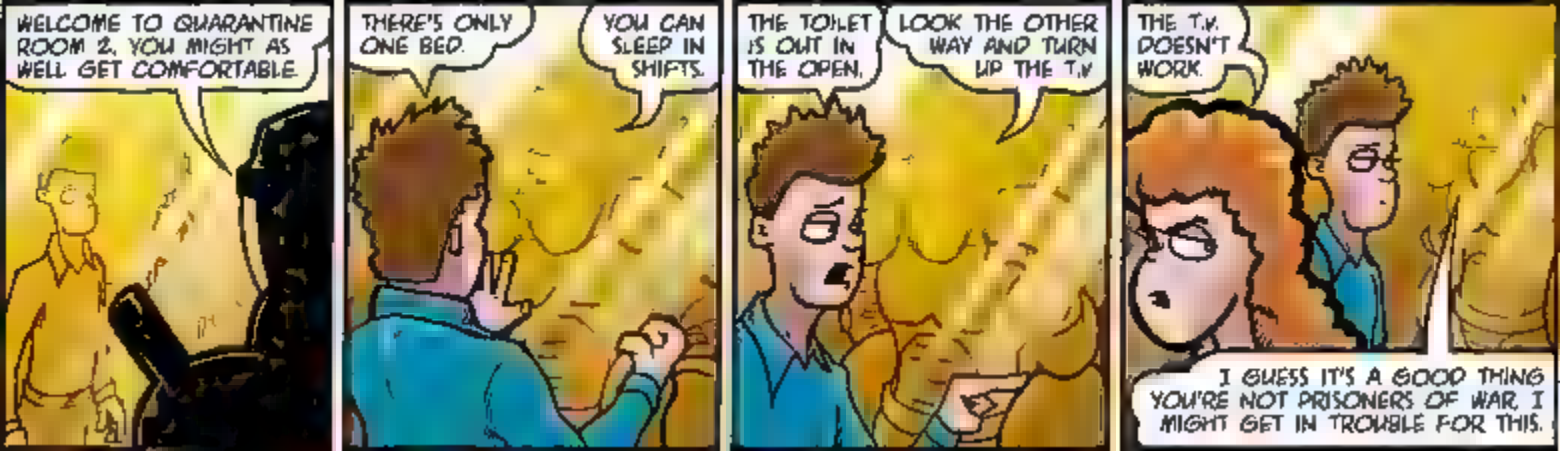

CAPTAIN TAGON, WHAT IS GOING ON OVER THERE?
MULTIPLE CONTACTS. THE TOUCH-AND-GO HAS OVERWATCH.
FROM UP HERE "OVERWATCH" LOOKS EXACTLY LIKE COLLATERAL DAMAGE.
MM-MMMM.
I CAN TRACK YOUR PROGRESS BY THE HOLES IN OUR MEDICAL WING.
SO WE ARE MAKING PROGRESS. EXCELLENT.

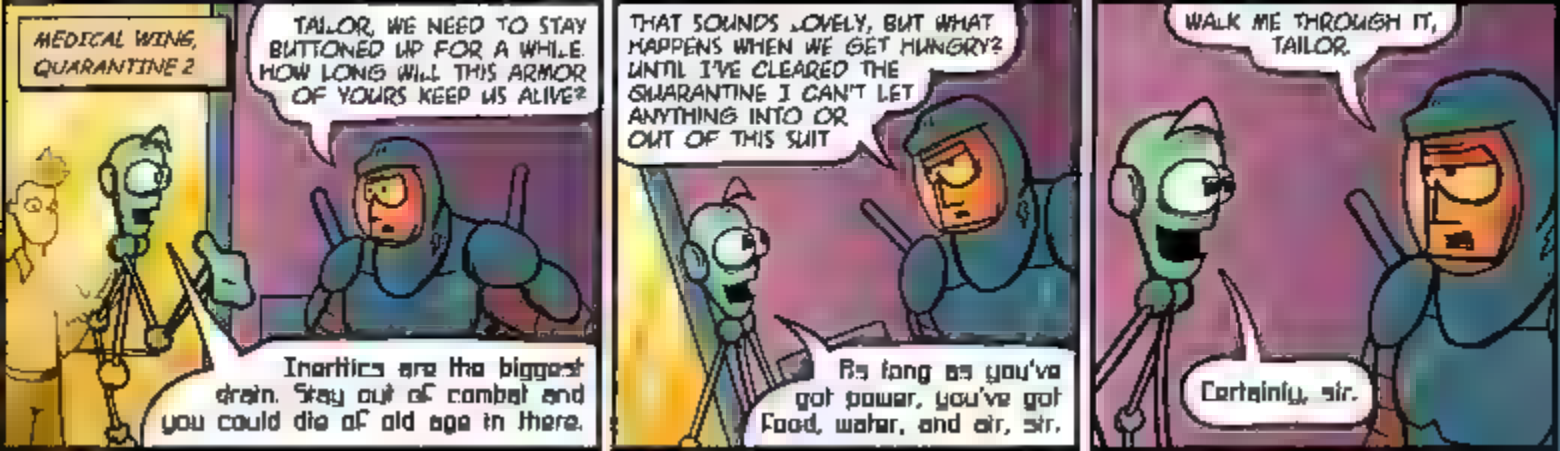


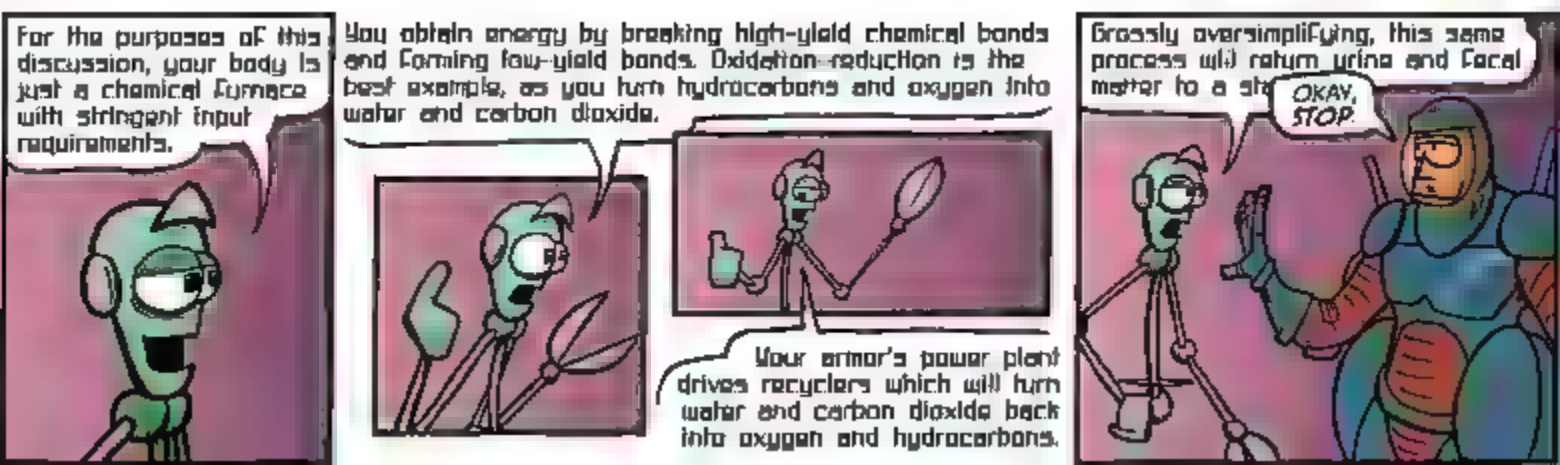

THIS "OVERWATCH" OF YOURS OBVIOUSLY GOT ITS "OVER" FROM "OVERKILL."
"Overkill" wasn't using it, since there's no such thing.

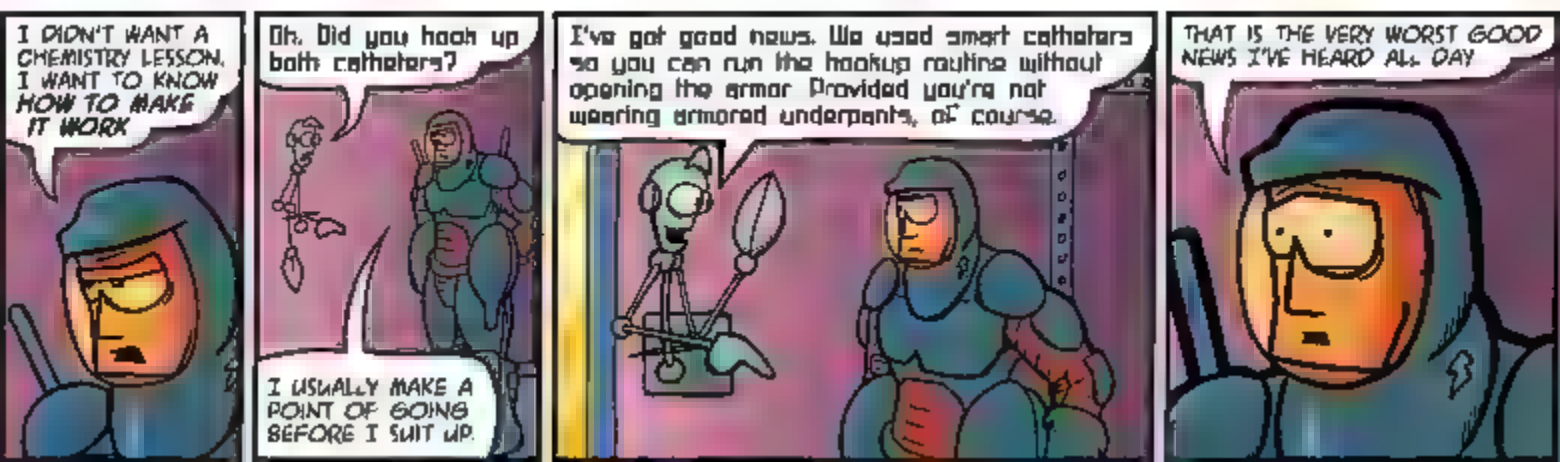

TAGII OUR CLIENT WANTS TO CHAT
Duly delegated, sir.
Commander, Tagon wants you to take this call from Security Chief Chavra.
SURE. I GUESS MULTI-TASKING ISN'T TAGON'S STRONG SUIT
Perhaps. I believe he hopes that if he is completely free from distractions he will be able to identify and eliminate one of these targets before I do.
SO LET HIM KILL ONE.
Keeping him alive is a more strongly weighted objective than keeping him happy.


COMMANDER ANDREYASN, WHAT EXACTLY IS TAGON DOING DOWN THERE?
BINNIE IS DEAD PERMANENTLY, THIS TIME.
TAGON'S TEAM IS ESCORTING THE THREE SURVIVORS OF BINNIE'S RAMPAGE TO QUARANTINE TWO, AND TAGU IS NEUTRALIZING THREATS AS THEY ARE IDENTIFIED
ONLY THREE? I.. WAIT, WHAT "THREATS?"
BINNIE'S VICTIMS. IT APPEARS HE INFECTED AND TRANSFORMED THEM VIA HEAD WOUNDS.
AND YOU'RE VAPORIZING THEM FROM THE SHIP?
YOU SHOULD BE FEELING A MIXTURE OF OUTRAGE AND TERROR RIGHT ABOUT NOW.

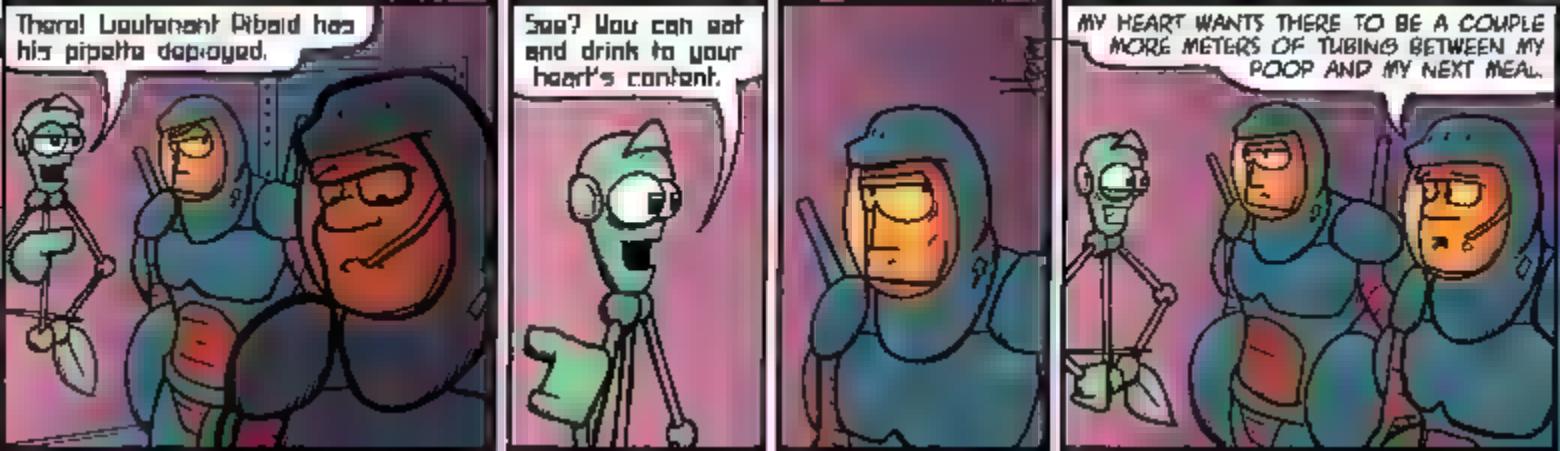

WELCOME TO QUARANTINE ROOM 2. YOU MIGHT AS WELL GET COMFORTABLE.
THERE'S ONLY ONE BED.
YOU CAN SLEEP IN SHIFTS.
THE TOILET IS OUT IN THE OPEN.
LOOK THE OTHER WAY AND TURN UP THE T.V.
THE T.V. DOESN'T WORK.
I GUESS IT'S A GOOD THING YOU'RE NOT PRISONERS OF WAR. I MIGHT GET IN TROUBLE FOR THIS.


MEDICAL WING, QUARANTINE 2
TAILOR, WE NEED TO STAY BUTTONED UP FOR A WHILE. HOW LONG WILL THIS ARMOR OF YOURS KEEP US ALIVE?
Inertics are the biggest drain. Stay out of combat and you could die of old age in there.
THAT SOUNDS LOVELY, BUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE GET HUNGRY? UNTIL I'VE CLEARED THE QUARANTINE I CAN'T LET ANYTHING INTO OR OUT OF THIS SUIT
As long as you've got power, you've got food, water, and air, sir.
WALK ME THROUGH IT, TAILOR.
Certainly, sir.

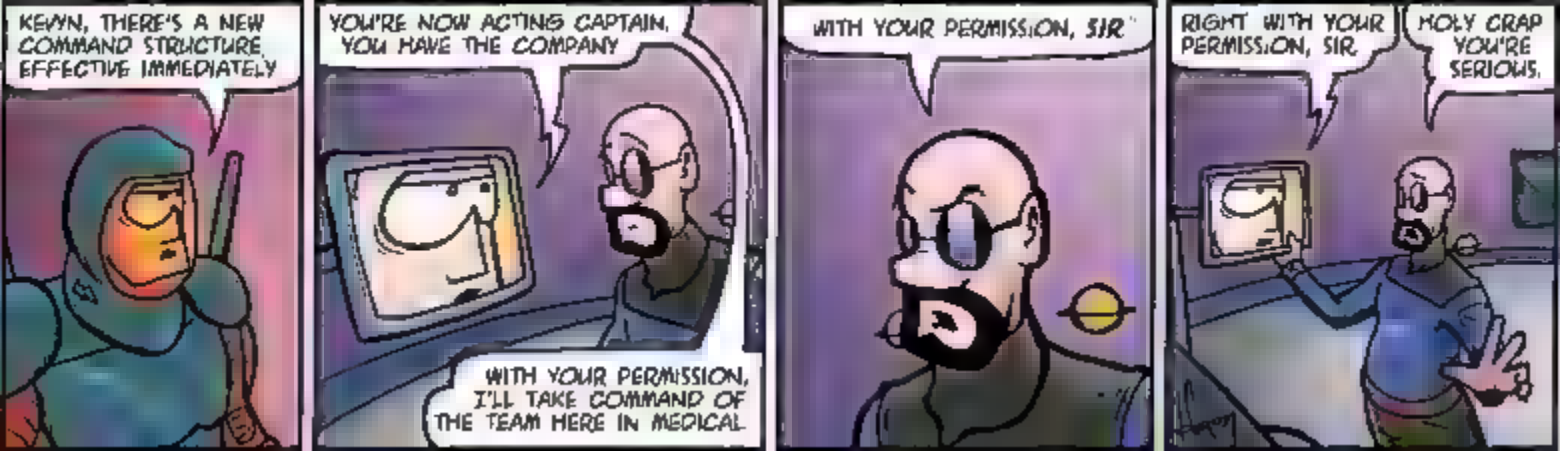

For the purposes of this discussion, your body is just a chemical furnace with stringent input requirements.
You obtain energy by breaking high-yield chemical bonds and forming low-yield bonds. Oxidation-reduction is the best example, as you turn hydrocarbons and oxygen into water and carbon dioxide.
Your armor's power plant drives recyclers which will turn water and carbon dioxide back into oxygen and hydrocarbons.
Grossly oversimplifying, this same process will return urine and fecal matter to a st
OKAY, STOP.

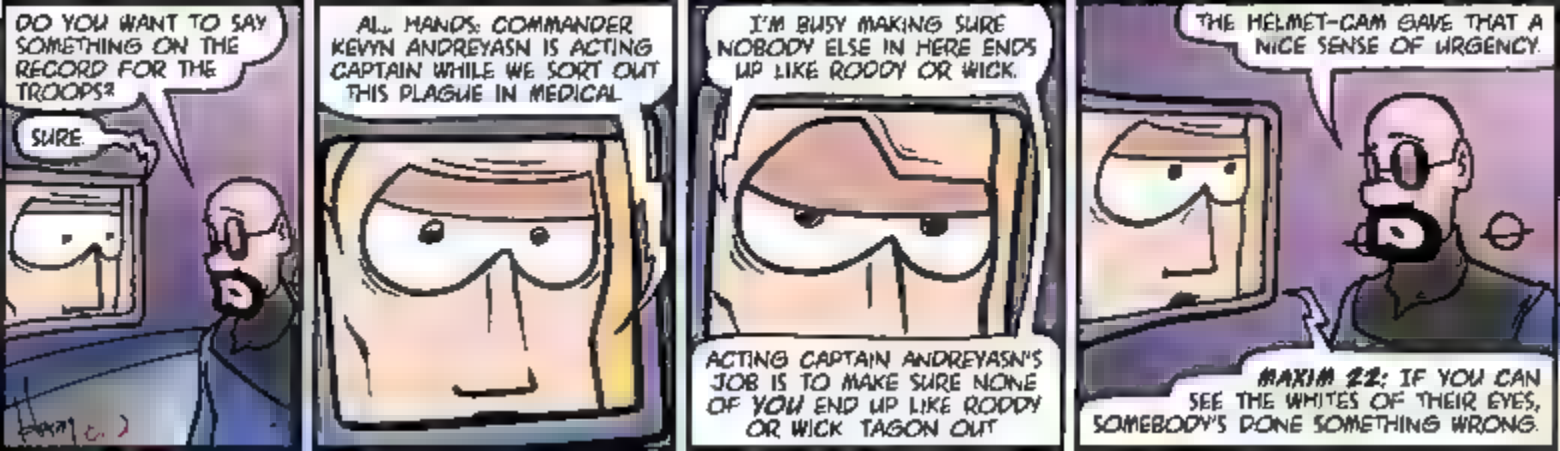

I DIDN'T WANT A CHEMISTRY LESSON. I WANT TO KNOW HOW TO MAKE IT WORK
Oh. Did you hook up both catheters?
I USUALLY MAKE A POINT OF GOING BEFORE I SUIT UP.
I've got good news. We used smart catheters so you can run the hookup routine without opening the armor. Provided you're not wearing armored underpants, of course.
THAT IS THE VERY WORST GOOD NEWS I'VE HEARD ALL DAY

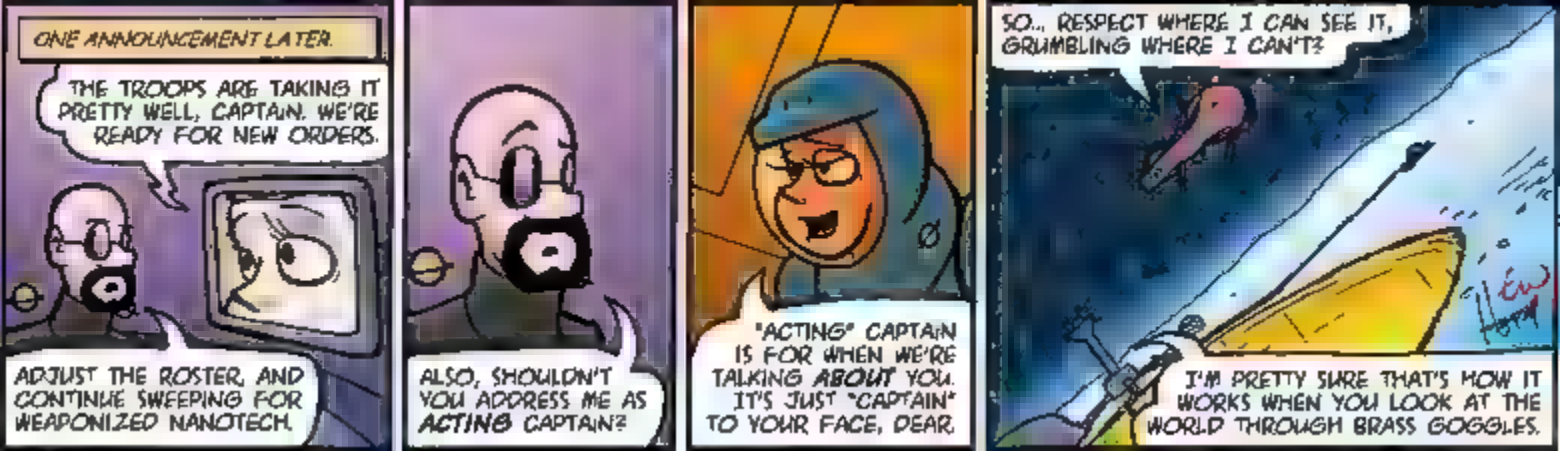

BOTH CATHETERS ARE IN.
We're all glad you silenced your comm.

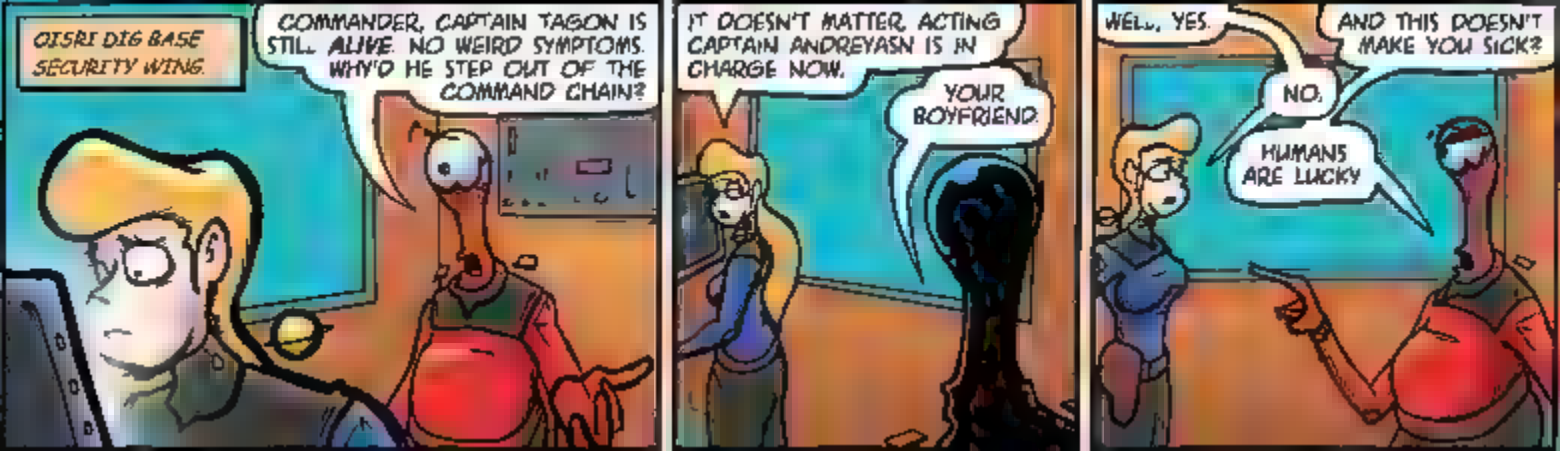

There! Lieutenant Ribald has his pipette deployed.
See? Now can eat and drink to your heart's content.
MY HEART WANTS THERE TO BE A COUPLE MORE METERS OF TUBING BETWEEN MY POOP AND MY NEXT MEAL.


CAPTAIN, I BELIEVE WE SHOULD REORGANIZE MISSION COMMAND
YEAH,.
I'M QUARANTINED, LOCKED IN HERE WITH NANOMACHINES THAT CAN REWRITE PEOPLE'S BRAINS.
I DON'T FEEL SICK, OR INFECTED, BUT I STILL DON'T TRUST MYSELF
AND CAN I TRUST ANYONE ELSE IN HERE TO TELL ME IF I'M STARTING TO ACT OUT OF LINE?
You've been drinking your own poop through a straw.

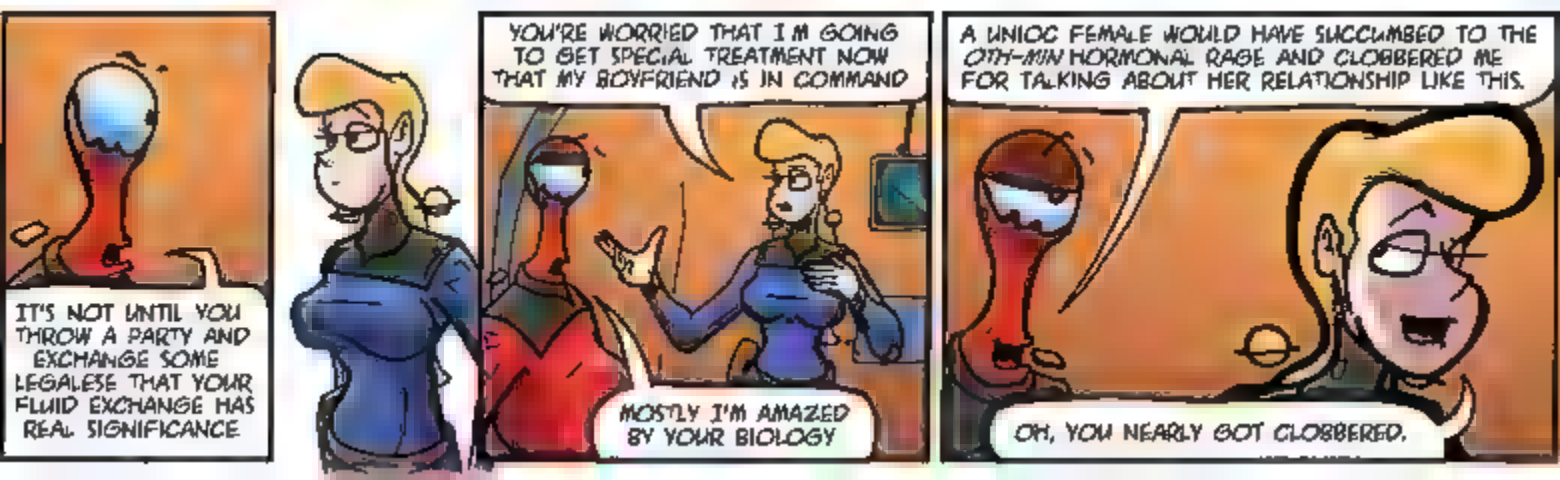

KEVYN, THERE'S A NEW COMMAND STRUCTURE, EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY
YOU'RE NOW ACTING CAPTAIN. YOU HAVE THE COMPANY
WITH YOUR PERMISSION, I'LL TAKE COMMAND OF THE TEAM HERE IN MEDICAL
WITH YOUR PERMISSION, SIR
RIGHT WITH YOUR PERMISSION, SIR
HOLY CRAP YOU'RE SERIOUS.


DO YOU WANT TO SAY SOMETHING ON THE RECORD FOR THE TROOPS?
SURE.
ALL HANDS: COMMANDER KEVYN ANDREYASN IS ACTING CAPTAIN WHILE WE SORT OUT THIS PLAGUE IN MEDICAL
I'M BUSY MAKING SURE NOBODY ELSE IN HERE ENDS UP LIKE RODDY OR WICK.
ACTING CAPTAIN ANDREYASN'S JOB IS TO MAKE SURE NONE OF YOU END UP LIKE RODDY OR WICK. TAGON OUT
THE HELMET-CAM GAVE THAT A NICE SENSE OF URGENCY.
MAXIM 22: IF YOU CAN SEE THE WHITES OF THEIR EYES, SOMEBODY'S DONE SOMETHING WRONG.


ONE ANNOUNCEMENT LATER.
THE TROOPS ARE TAKING IT PRETTY WELL, CAPTAIN. WE'RE READY FOR NEW ORDERS.
ADJUST THE ROSTER, AND CONTINUE SWEEPING FOR WEAPONIZED NANOTECH.
ALSO, SHOULDN'T YOU ADDRESS ME AS ACTING CAPTAIN?
"ACTING" CAPTAIN IS FOR WHEN WE'RE TALKING ABOUT YOU. IT'S JUST "CAPTAIN" TO YOUR FACE, DEAR.
SO... RESPECT WHERE I CAN SEE IT, GRUMBLING WHERE I CAN'T?
I'M PRETTY SURE THAT'S HOW IT WORKS WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE WORLD THROUGH BRASS GOGGLES.


OISRI DIG BASE
SECURITY WING.
COMMANDER, CAPTAIN TAGON IS STILL ALIVE. NO WEIRD SYMPTOMS. WHY'D HE STEP OUT OF THE COMMAND CHAIN?
IT DOESN'T MATTER. ACTING CAPTAIN ANDREYASN IS IN CHARGE NOW.
YOUR BOYFRIEND.
WELL, YES.
NO.
AND THIS DOESN'T MAKE YOU SICK?
HUMANS ARE LUCKY

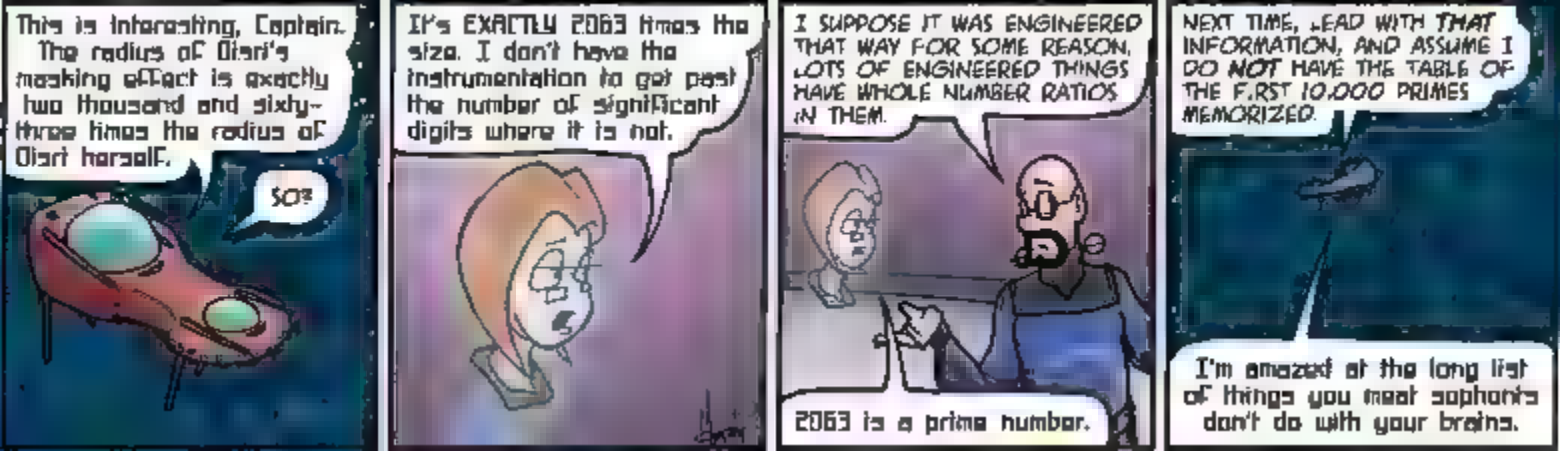

IF I HAD A MATE, AND SHE GOT PROMOTED TO A SENIOR POSITION, I'D TURN JUN I'D LOSE TWENTY KILOS SAND AND GRIT, I'D BECOME STERILE IF IT WEREN'T FOR MODERN MEDICINE.
KEVYN IS NOT MY MATE, EBBIRNOTH.
LIKE I SAID, HUMANS ARE LUCKY
THE TWO OF YOU HAVE MATED. THE REQUISITE BIOLOGICAL WORK HAS BEGUN. FOR A UNIOC COUPLE THAT WOULD HAVE RAMIFICATIONS.
STOP SAYING "MATE," LIEUTENANT
BUT FOR HUMANS THERE ARE NO PHYSIOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES BEYOND A MILD HORMONE ADDICTION, AND OCCASIONAL EPISODES OF IRRATIONAL BEHAVIOR.

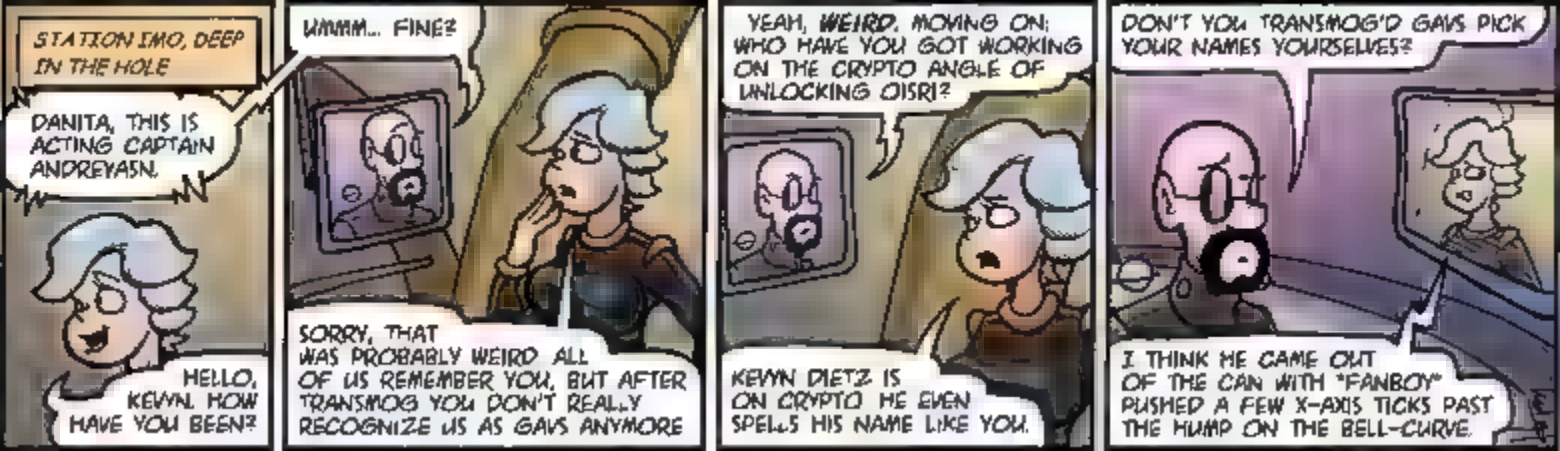

IT'S NOT UNTIL YOU THROW A PARTY AND EXCHANGE SOME LEGALESE THAT YOUR FLUID EXCHANGE HAS REAL SIGNIFICANCE
YOU'RE WORRIED THAT I'M GOING TO GET SPECIAL TREATMENT NOW THAT MY BOYFRIEND IS IN COMMAND
MOSTLY I'M AMAZED BY YOUR BIOLOGY
A UNIOC FEMALE WOULD HAVE SUCCUMBED TO THE 07TH-MIN HORMONAL RAGE AND CLOBBERED ME FOR TALKING ABOUT HER RELATIONSHIP LIKE THIS.
OH, YOU NEARLY GOT CLOBBERED.

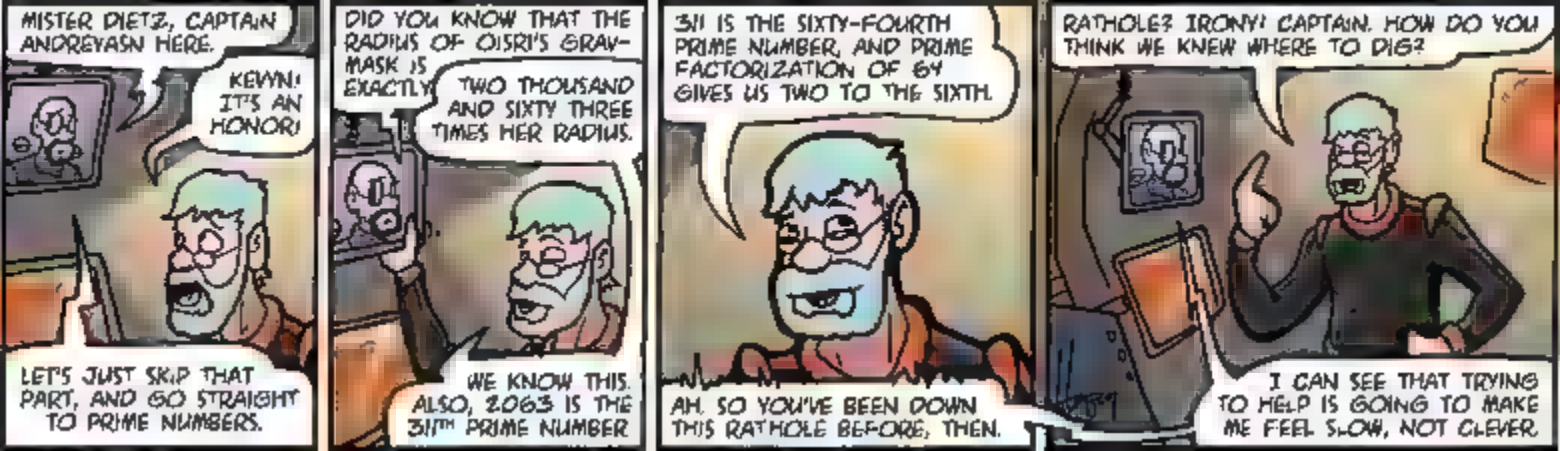

CAN WE TALK ABOUT SOMETHING BESIDES MY LOVE LIFE? THE SWEEP TEAMS, MAYBE?
OH, SURE. I JUST HAD TO MAKE SURE YOU WERE REALLY CURED OF THAT STIMMIE BERSERKER THING FROM WAY BACK.
OUR DOCTOR AND MEDIC ARE BOTH UNDER QUARANTINE. WHO WAS GOING TO SAVE YOUR LIFE IF I POUNDED ON YOU, LIEUTENANT?
SEE? THAT'S WHY YOU'RE A COMMANDER AND I'M A LOWLIE YOU FOUND THE PROBLEM WITH MY PLAN!


YOU'VE GOT MEDICAL TRAINING, RIGHT? WE'RE DOWN TO ZERO NON-QUARANTINED MEDICS.
I LEARNED ANATOMY SO I COULD HURT PEOPLE. WE'RE BETTER OFF TAPPING ONE OF THE GAVS.
THEY ALL HAVE THOSE RETRO-EXO-NANNIES IN 'EM. I'M NOT GOING TO LET THEM INTO THESE BARRACKS, LET ALONE TOUCH MY PEOPLE.
COULD THEY ADVISE?
THE MEDICALLY-TRAINED GAVS WERE ALL OVER IN MEDICAL, WHERE THEY'RE NOW EITHER UNDEAD OR ASH.
OUR HEALTH PLAN IS STARTING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE "JUMP IN THE NEAREST CRYOKIT AND WAIT FOR PAYDAY."

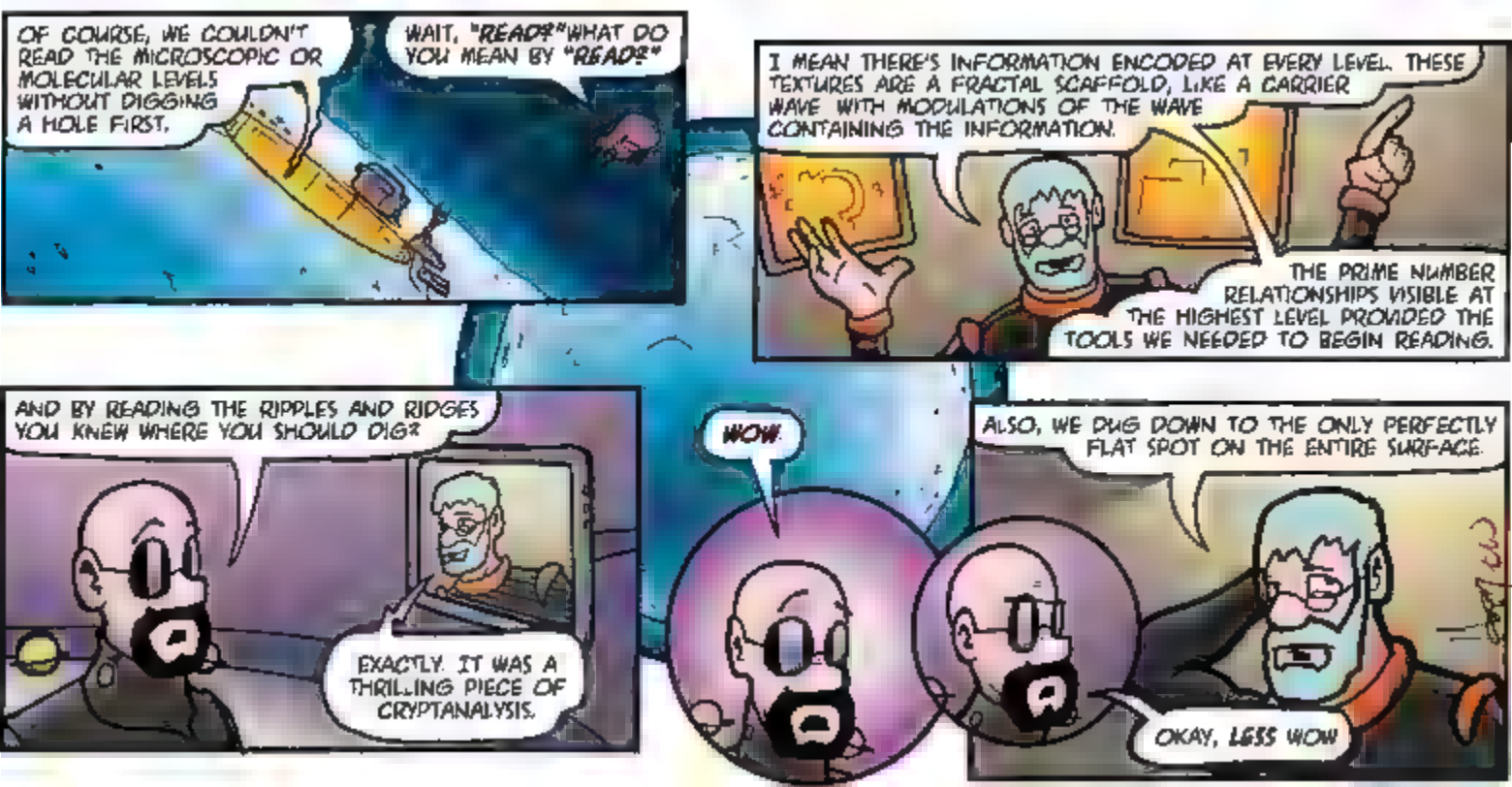

ENGINEERING IS CLEAN, COMMANDER
THANK YOU, THURL.
OF COURSE, BY "CLEAN" I MEAN "THE ONLY SUSPECT NANOTECH IS SWIMMING IN THE BLOODSTREAMS OF OUR CLIENTS."
SO, WE'RE ACTUALLY HERE TO SAVE THESE SCIENTISTS FROM THEMSELVES ...
IF WE'VE LEARNED ANYTHING FROM THAT BLOODBATH IN MEDICAL, IT'S THAT IF THIS DROPS IN THE CRAPPER, THE ONLY PEOPLE WE'LL BE SAVING WILL BE US.
LET'S NOT PASS THAT ALONG TO OUR EMPLOYER JUST YET

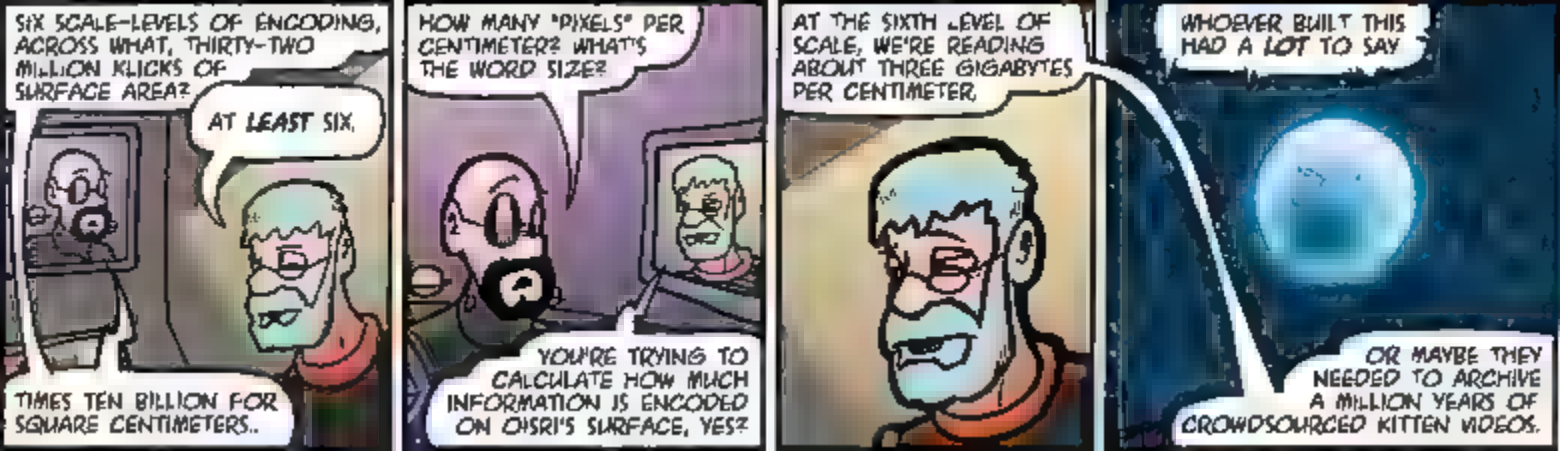

This is interesting, Captain. The radius of Diori's masking effect is exactly two thousand and sixty-three times the radius of Diori herself.
SO?
It's EXACTLY 2063 times the size. I don't have the instrumentation to get past the number of significant digits where it is not.
I SUPPOSE IT WAS ENGINEERED THAT WAY FOR SOME REASON. LOTS OF ENGINEERED THINGS HAVE WHOLE NUMBER RATIOS IN THEM.
2063 is a prime number.
NEXT TIME, LEAD WITH THAT INFORMATION, AND ASSUME I DO NOT HAVE THE TABLE OF THE FIRST 10,000 PRIMES MEMORIZED.
I'm amazed at the long list of things you most sophonts don't do with your brains.


STATION IMO, DEEP IN THE HOLE
DANITA, THIS IS ACTING CAPTAIN ANDREYASN.
HELLO, KEVYN. HOW HAVE YOU BEEN?
UHHM... FINE?
SORRY, THAT WAS PROBABLY WEIRD. ALL OF US REMEMBER YOU, BUT AFTER TRANSMOG YOU DON'T REALLY RECOGNIZE US AS GAVS ANYMORE
YEAH, WEIRD. MOVING ON: WHO HAVE YOU GOT WORKING ON THE CRYPTO ANGLE OF UNLOCKING OISRI?
KEVYN DIETZ IS ON CRYPTO. HE EVEN SPELLS HIS NAME LIKE YOU.
DON'T YOU TRANSMOG'D GAVS PICK YOUR NAMES YOURSELVES?
I THINK HE CAME OUT OF THE CAN WITH "FANBOY" PUSHED A FEW X-AXIS TICKS PAST THE HUMP ON THE BELL-CURVE.

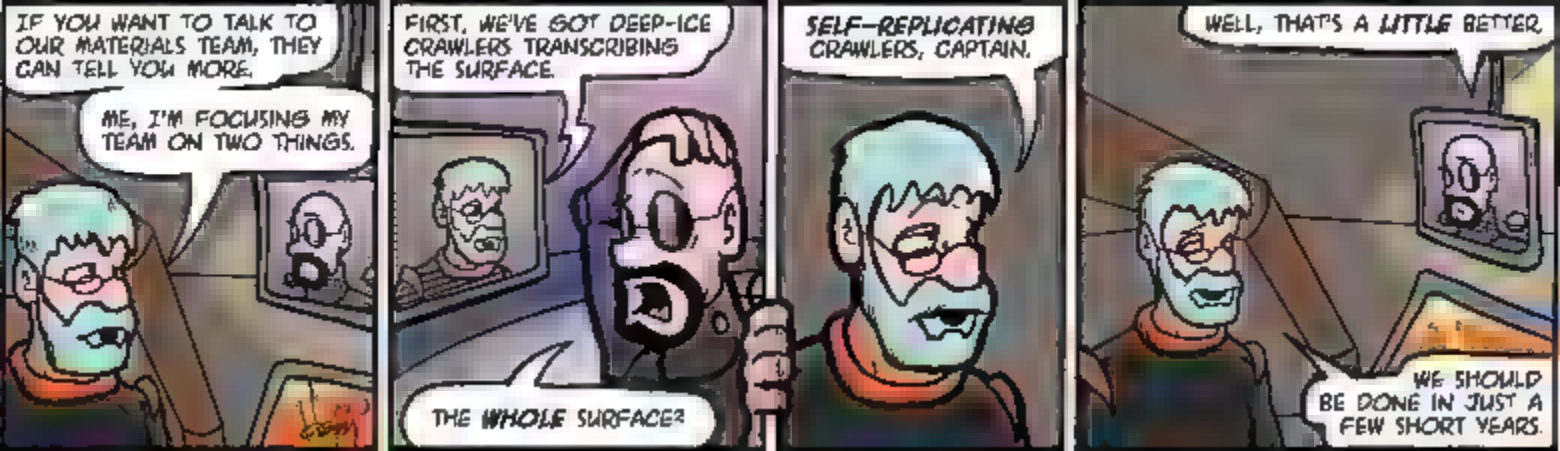

MISTER DIETZ, CAPTAIN ANDREYASN HERE.
KEVYN! IT'S AN HONOR!
LET'S JUST SKIP THAT PART, AND GO STRAIGHT TO PRIME NUMBERS.
DID YOU KNOW THAT THE RADIUS OF OISRI'S GRAV-MASK IS EXACTLY
TWO THOUSAND AND SIXTY THREE TIMES HER RADIUS.
WE KNOW THIS. ALSO, 2063 IS THE 311TH PRIME NUMBER
311 IS THE SIXTY-FOURTH PRIME NUMBER, AND PRIME FACTORIZATION OF 64 GIVES US TWO TO THE SIXTH.
AH. SO YOU'VE BEEN DOWN THIS RATHOLE BEFORE, THEN.
RATHOLE? IRONY! CAPTAIN. HOW DO YOU THINK WE KNEW WHERE TO DIG?
I CAN SEE THAT TRYING TO HELP IS GOING TO MAKE ME FEEL SLOW, NOT CLEVER.

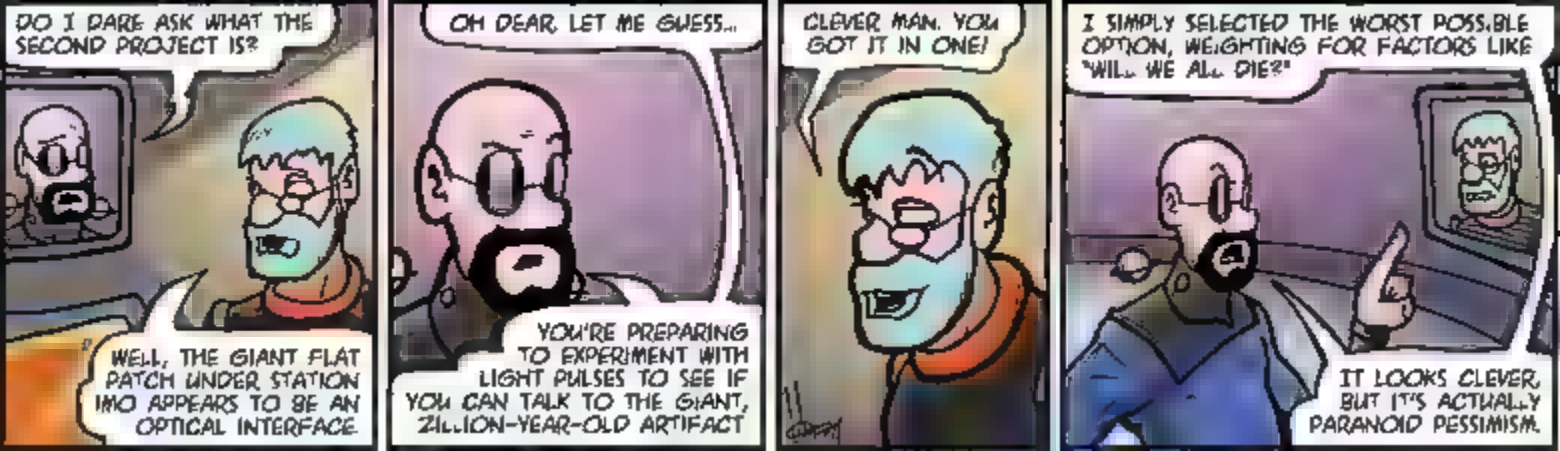

YOU SEE, OISRI'S TRUE, DEEP SURFACE IS NOT A PERFECTLY SMOOTH SPHERE. IT'S HEAVILY TEXTURED AT ALL OBSERVABLE SCALES.
THERE ARE RANGES OF HILLS AND RIDGES, RIPPLES UP AND DOWN THOSE HILLS, AND A POCK-AND-PEBBLE TEXTURE ON THE RIPPLES.
BUT IT DOESN'T STOP THERE. THE POCK-AND-PEBBLE FEATURES ARE FURTHER TEXTURED WITH PITS AND GRAINS, LIKE SANDPAPER.
AND IT CONTINUES! THE SANDPAPER GRAINS HAVE TEXTURES AT THE MICROSCOPIC, AND MOLECULAR LEVELS.

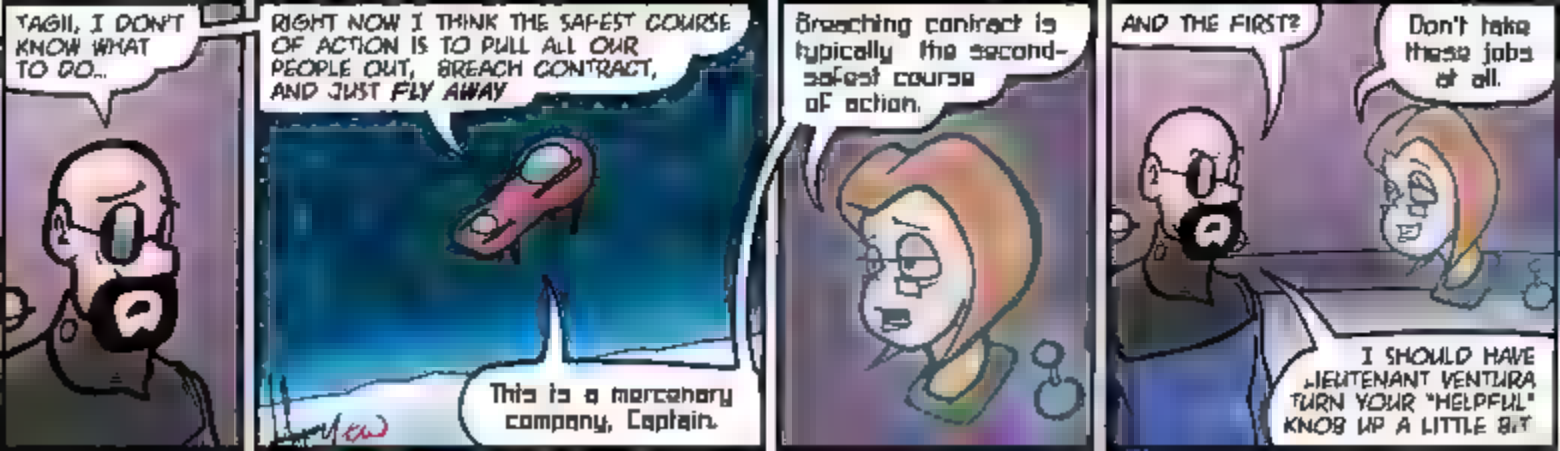

OF COURSE, WE COULDN'T READ THE MICROSCOPIC OR MOLECULAR LEVELS WITHOUT DIGGING A HOLE FIRST.
WAIT, "READ?" WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY "READ?"
I MEAN THERE'S INFORMATION ENCODED AT EVERY LEVEL. THESE TEXTURES ARE A FRACTAL SCAFFOLD, LIKE A CARRIER WAVE WITH MODULATIONS OF THE WAVE CONTAINING THE INFORMATION.
THE PRIME NUMBER RELATIONSHIPS VISIBLE AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL PROVIDED THE TOOLS WE NEEDED TO BEGIN READING.
AND BY READING THE RIPPLES AND RIDGES YOU KNEW WHERE YOU SHOULD DIG?
EXACTLY. IT WAS A THRILLING PIECE OF CRYPTANALYSIS.
WOW.
ALSO, WE DUG DOWN TO THE ONLY PERFECTLY FLAT SPOT ON THE ENTIRE SURFACE.
OKAY, LESS WOW


SIX SCALE-LEVELS OF ENCODING, ACROSS WHAT, THIRTY-TWO MILLION KLICKS OF SURFACE AREA?
AT LEAST SIX.
TIMES TEN BILLION FOR SQUARE CENTIMETERS..
HOW MANY "PIXELS" PER CENTIMETER? WHAT'S THE WORD SIZE?
YOU'RE TRYING TO CALCULATE HOW MUCH INFORMATION IS ENCODED ON OHSRI'S SURFACE, YES?
AT THE SIXTH LEVEL OF SCALE, WE'RE READING ABOUT THREE GIGABYTES PER CENTIMETER.
WHOEVER BUILT THIS HAD A LOT TO SAY
OR MAYBE THEY NEEDED TO ARCHIVE A MILLION YEARS OF CROWDSOURCED KITTEN VIDEOS.

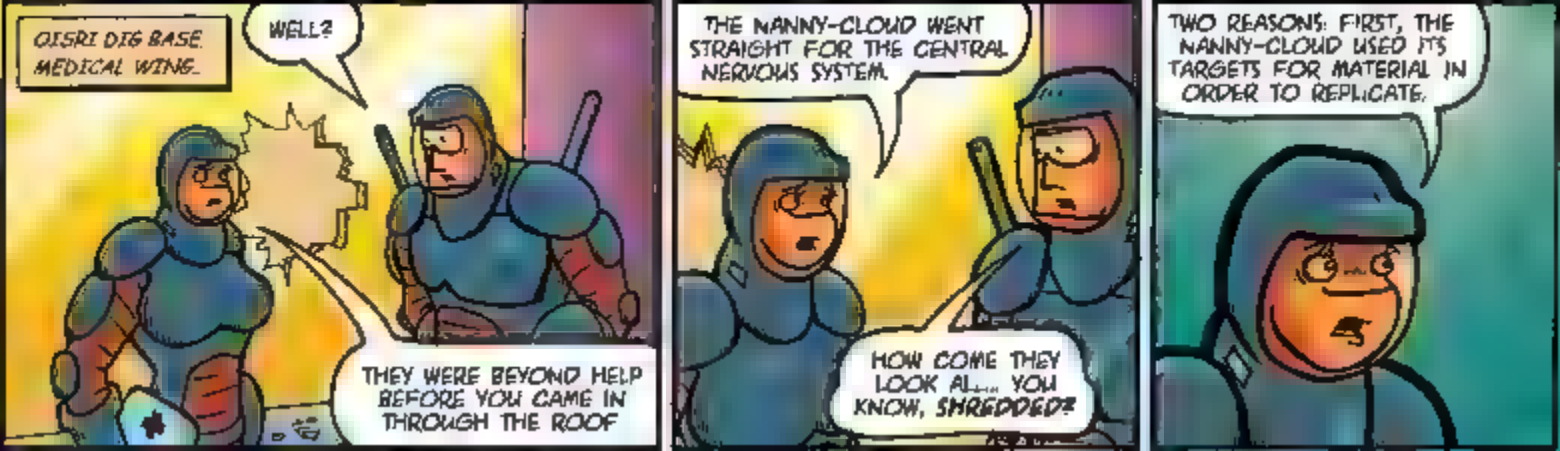

HOW DID THAT LEVEL OF DETAIL SURVIVE MILLIONS OF YEARS UNDER SIX KILOMETERS OF CRUSHING ICE? WHAT'S THE MATERIAL?
FAMILIAR STUFF: SUPER-STABLE, POST-TRANS-URANIC ALLOYS.
WE USE THOSE IN ANNIE PLANTS AND HIGH-END HULL PLATES.
USING OUR MOST EFFICIENT FABBER TECH, A P.T.U. PROJECT JUST ONE ONE-HUNDREDTH THE SIZE OF OISR1 WOULD BANKRUPT A SMALL STAR.
MAYBE THEY STARTED WITH A LARGE STAR.
AND MAYBE THEY'RE NOT HERE TO TELL US ABOUT IT BECAUSE BANKRUPTCY KILLED THEM.

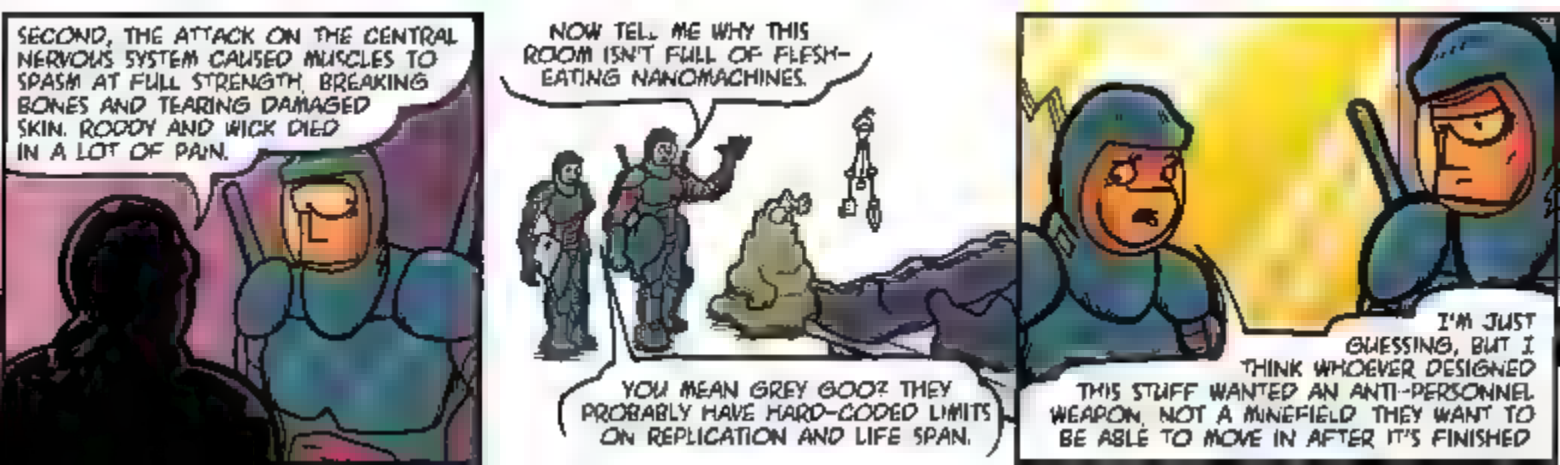

IF YOU WANT TO TALK TO OUR MATERIALS TEAM, THEY CAN TELL YOU MORE.
ME, I'M FOCUSING MY TEAM ON TWO THINGS.
FIRST, WE'VE GOT DEEP-ICE CRAWLERS TRANSCRIBING THE SURFACE.
THE WHOLE SURFACE?
SELF-REPLICATING CRAWLERS, CAPTAIN.
WELL, THAT'S A LITTLE BETTER.
WE SHOULD BE DONE IN JUST A FEW SHORT YEARS.

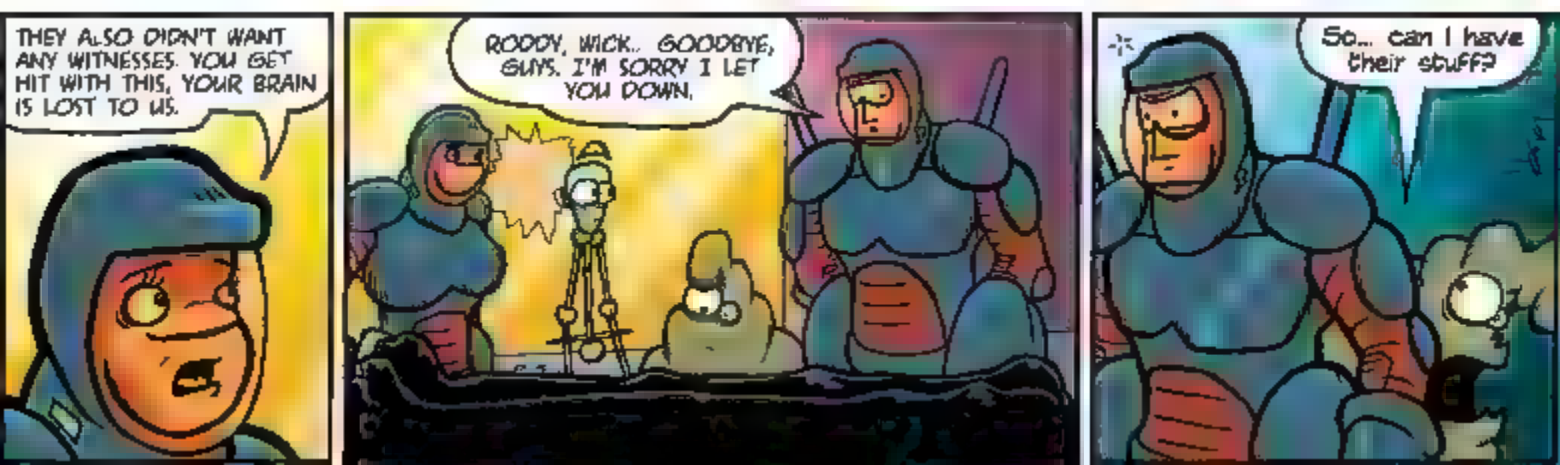

DO I DARE ASK WHAT THE SECOND PROJECT IS?
WELL, THE GIANT FLAT PATCH UNDER STATION IMO APPEARS TO BE AN OPTICAL INTERFACE
OH DEAR LET ME GUESS...
YOU'RE PREPARING TO EXPERIMENT WITH LIGHT PULSES TO SEE IF YOU CAN TALK TO THE GIANT, ZILLION-YEAR-OLD ARTIFACT
CLEVER MAN. YOU GOT IT IN ONE!
I SIMPLY SELECTED THE WORST POSSIBLE OPTION, WEIGHTING FOR FACTORS LIKE "WILL WE ALL DIE?"
IT LOOKS CLEVER, BUT IT'S ACTUALLY PARANOID PESSIMISM.


YAGH, I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO...
RIGHT NOW I THINK THE SAFEST COURSE OF ACTION IS TO PULL ALL OUR PEOPLE OUT, BREACH CONTRACT, AND JUST FLY AWAY
This is a mercenary company, Captain.
Breaching contract is typically the second-safest course of action.
AND THE FIRST?
Don't take these jobs at all.
I SHOULD HAVE LIEUTENANT VENTURA TURN YOUR "HELPFUL" KNOB UP A LITTLE BIT

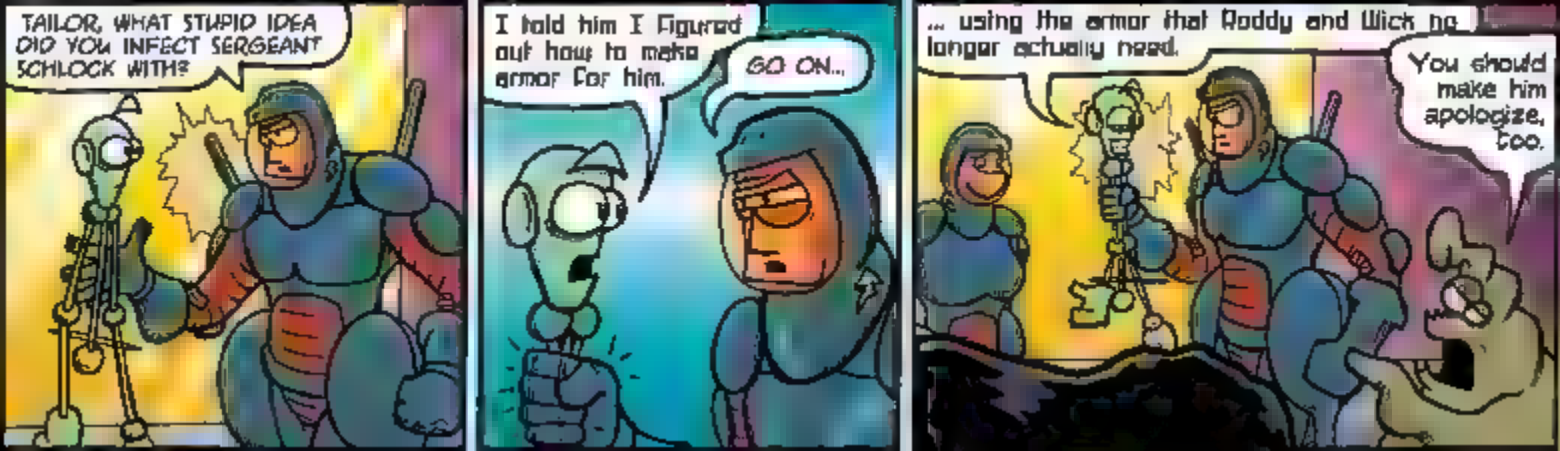

Captain, you should talk this over with Gav.
WHICH ONE? THEY'RE ALL GAVS.
OUCH. YOU WOUND ME.
OH. YOU MEAN MY BLUE-HAIRED DRINKING BUDDY THE GAV STANDING RIGHT BEHIND ME.
I'm being helpful.
THAT SOUNDED A LOT LIKE "THIS IS FOR YOUR OWN GOOD."
It always is.

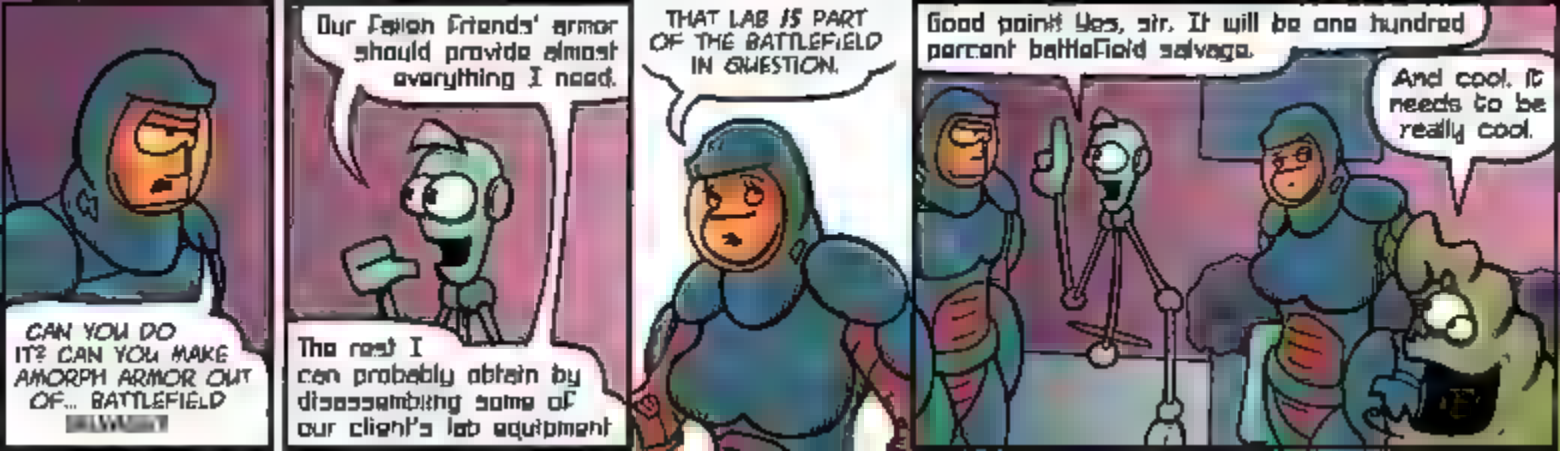

OISRI DIG BASE. MEDICAL WING.
WELL?
THEY WERE BEYOND HELP BEFORE YOU CAME IN THROUGH THE ROOF
THE NANNY-CLOUD WENT STRAIGHT FOR THE CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM.
HOW COME THEY LOOK AL... YOU KNOW, SHREDDED?
TWO REASONS: FIRST, THE NANNY-CLOUD USED ITS TARGETS FOR MATERIAL IN ORDER TO REPLICATE.


SECOND, THE ATTACK ON THE CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM CAUSED MUSCLES TO SPASM AT FULL STRENGTH, BREAKING BONES AND TEARING DAMAGED SKIN. ROODY AND WICK DIED IN A LOT OF PAIN.
NOW TELL ME WHY THIS ROOM ISN'T FULL OF FLESH-EATING NANOMACHINES.
YOU MEAN GREY GOO? THEY PROBABLY HAVE HARD-CODED LIMITS ON REPLICATION AND LIFE SPAN.
I'M JUST GUESSING, BUT I THINK WHOEVER DESIGNED THIS STUFF WANTED AN ANTI-PERSONNEL WEAPON, NOT A MINEFIELD. THEY WANT TO BE ABLE TO MOVE IN AFTER IT'S FINISHED

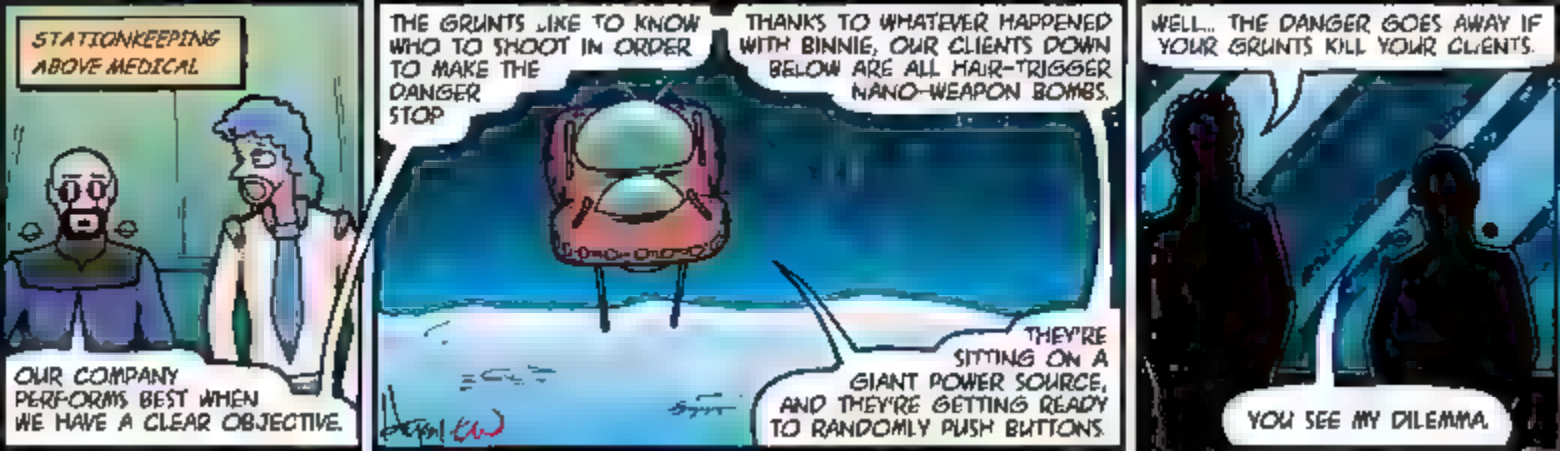

THEY ALSO DIDN'T WANT ANY WITNESSES. YOU GET HIT WITH THIS, YOUR BRAIN IS LOST TO US.
ROODY, WICK.. GOODBYE, GUYS. I'M SORRY I LET YOU DOWN.
So... can I have their stuff?


SERGEANT, YOU HAVE TEN SECONDS TO APOLOGIZE FOR THAT REMARK, AND THEN I AM GOING TO TAKE YOU APART PIECE BY PIECE.
I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I just...
Tailor said...
Wait... are you going to take me apart anyway? You still look really mad.
Your ultimatum was a little ambiguous, sir.

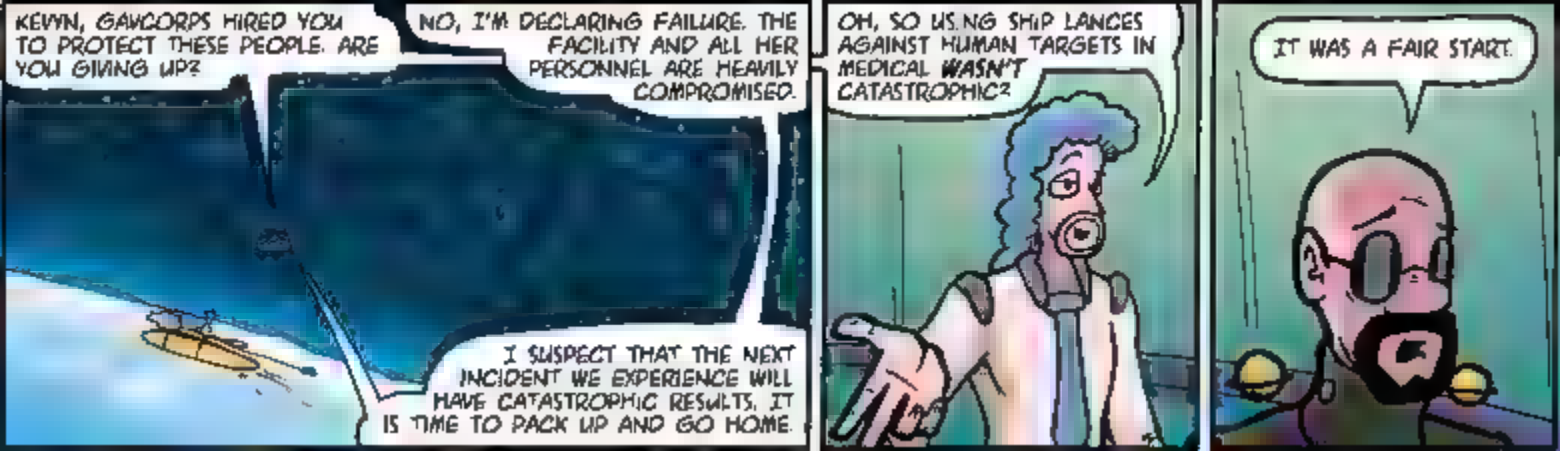

TAILOR, WHAT STUPID IDEA DID YOU INFECT SERGEANT SCHLOCK WITH?
I told him I figured out how to make armor for him.
GO ON...
... using the armor that Roddy and Wick no longer actually need.
You should make him apologize, too.

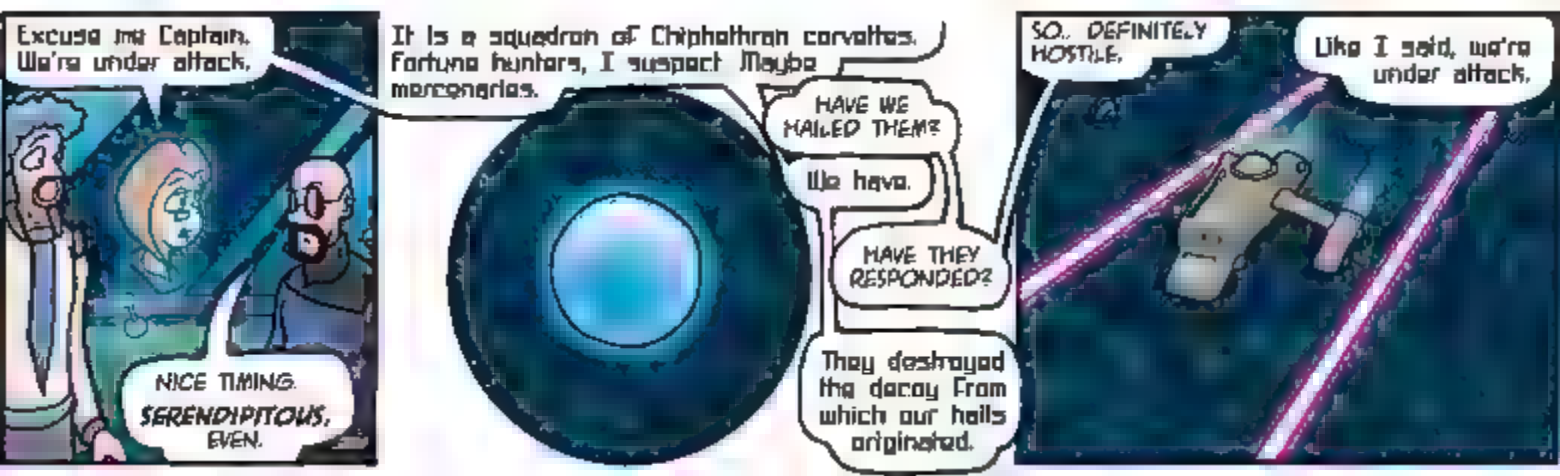

CAN YOU DO IT? CAN YOU MAKE AMORPH ARMOR OUT OF... BATTLEFIELD
Our Pelion friends' armor should provide almost everything I need.
The rest I can probably obtain by disassembling some of our client's lab equipment
THAT LAB IS PART OF THE BATTLEFIELD IN QUESTION.
Good point. Yes, sir. It will be one hundred percent battlefield salvage.
And cool. It needs to be really cool.


CAPTAIN, I AM NINETY-FIVE PERCENT DONE WITH THE QUARANTINE RIG.
ALL THE TRIGGERS AND DETONATORS ARE SET AND CROSS-LINKED.
IF ANYTHING GOES PEAR-SHAPED IN QUARANTINE TWO, OR IF ONE OF US PUSHES THE PANIC BUTTON, THE WHOLE ROOM FLASHES.
ASSUMING, OF COURSE, YOU GET ME THE FIFTEEN KILOS OF BURNEX I ASKED FOR.
FIFTEEN? I THOUGHT YOU SAID FIVE.
OKAY, TEN. BUT THAT'S MY FINAL OFFER.

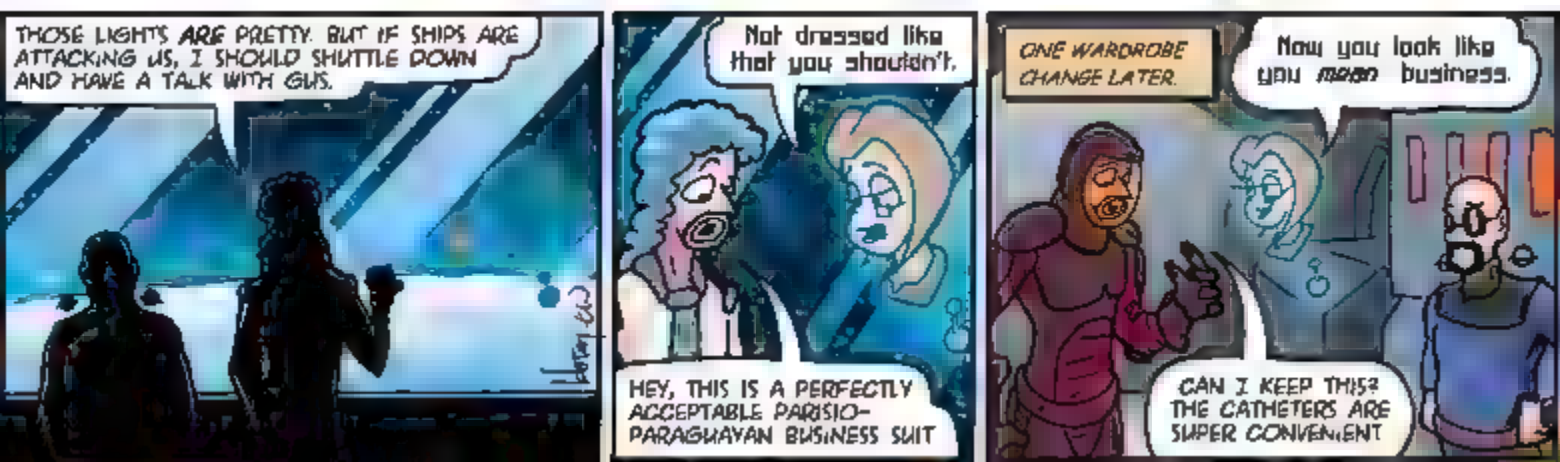

STATIONKEEPING ABOVE MEDICAL
OUR COMPANY PERFORMS BEST WHEN WE HAVE A CLEAR OBJECTIVE.
THE GRUNTS LIKE TO KNOW WHO TO SHOOT IN ORDER TO MAKE THE DANGER STOP
THANKS TO WHATEVER HAPPENED WITH BINNIE, OUR CLIENTS DOWN BELOW ARE ALL HAIR-TRIGGER NANO-WEAPON BOMBS.
THEY'RE SITTING ON A GIANT POWER SOURCE, AND THEY'RE GETTING READY TO RANDOMLY PUSH BUTTONS.
WELL... THE DANGER GOES AWAY IF YOUR GRUNTS KILL YOUR CLIENTS.
YOU SEE MY DILEMMA.


WAIT, YOU'RE SERIOUS?
DEAD SERIOUS. I KNOW THESE TROOPS.
IF ANY OF THOSE GAVS TURN INTO MURDER ZOMBIES LIKE BINNIE DID, THE TROOPS WILL ENGAGE WITH EXTREME PREJUDICE ORDERS NOTWITHSTANDING.
THEN YOU'VE GOT A DISCIPLINE PROBLEM.
YES. AND YOU'VE GOT A "WE MIGHT ALL DIE" PROBLEM.
YOUR PROBLEM CAUSES MY PROBLEM.
I CAN LIVE WITH MY PROBLEM.

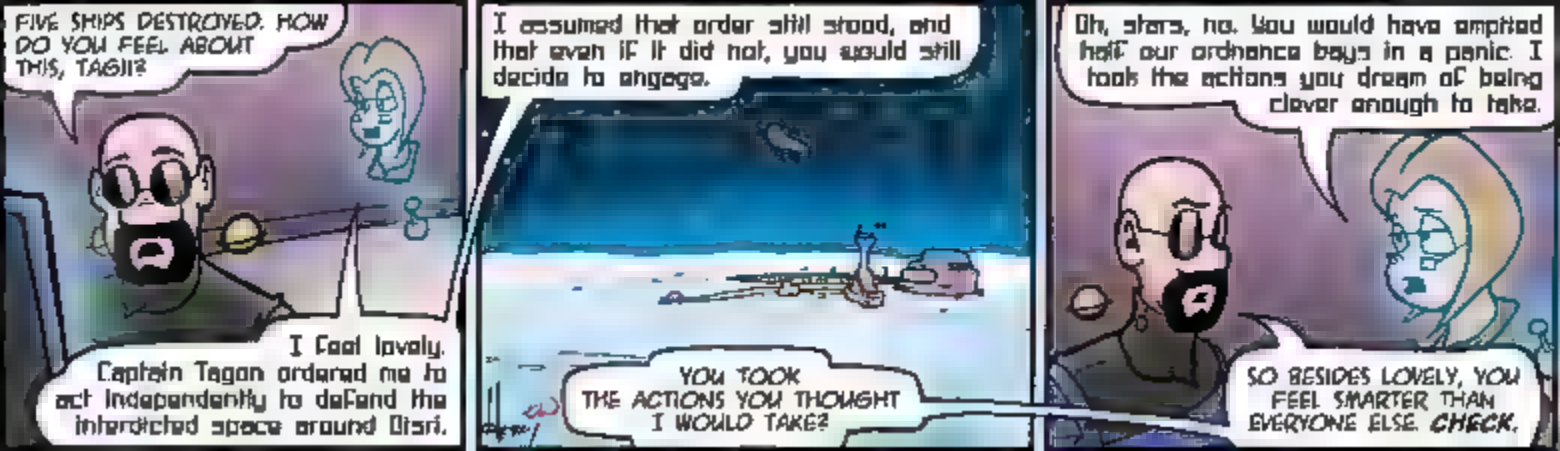

KEVYN, GAVCORPS HIRED YOU TO PROTECT THESE PEOPLE. ARE YOU GIVING UP?
NO, I'M DECLARING FAILURE. THE FACILITY AND ALL HER PERSONNEL ARE HEAVILY COMPROMISED.
I SUSPECT THAT THE NEXT INCIDENT WE EXPERIENCE WILL HAVE CATASTROPHIC RESULTS. IT IS TIME TO PACK UP AND GO HOME.
OH, SO USING SHIP LANCES AGAINST HUMAN TARGETS IN MEDICAL WASN'T CATASTROPHIC?
IT WAS A FAIR START.


Excuse me Captain. We're under attack.
NICE TIMING. SERENDIPITOUS, EVEN.
It is a squadron of Chiphalthran corvettes. Fortune hunters, I suspect. Maybe mercenaries.
HAVE WE HAILED THEM?
We have.
HAVE THEY RESPONDED?
They destroyed the decoy from which our hails originated.
SO.. DEFINITELY HOSTILE.
Like I said, we're under attack.

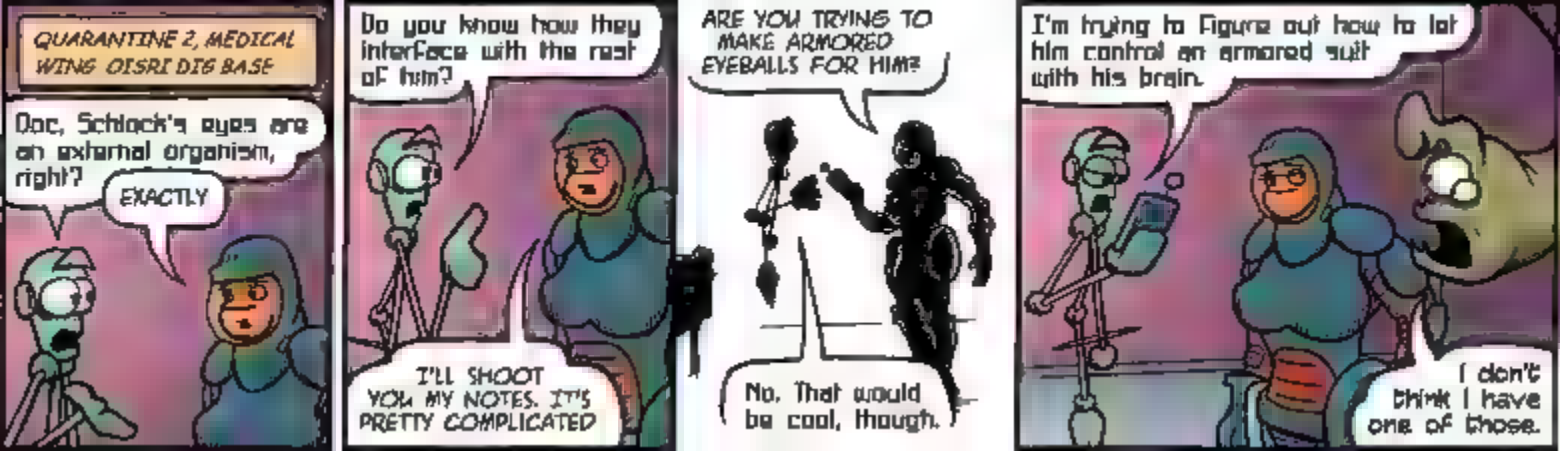

HAVE YOU GOT THIS?
Oh, absolutely.
Okay. Threats neutralized.
GOOD WORK, TAGH. THANK YOU.
YOUR COMPANY IS DOING FINE. SEE? NO "CATASTROPHIC RESULTS."
You should see the other guys.
No really. Watch for pretty lights just above the southern horizon in six minutes.

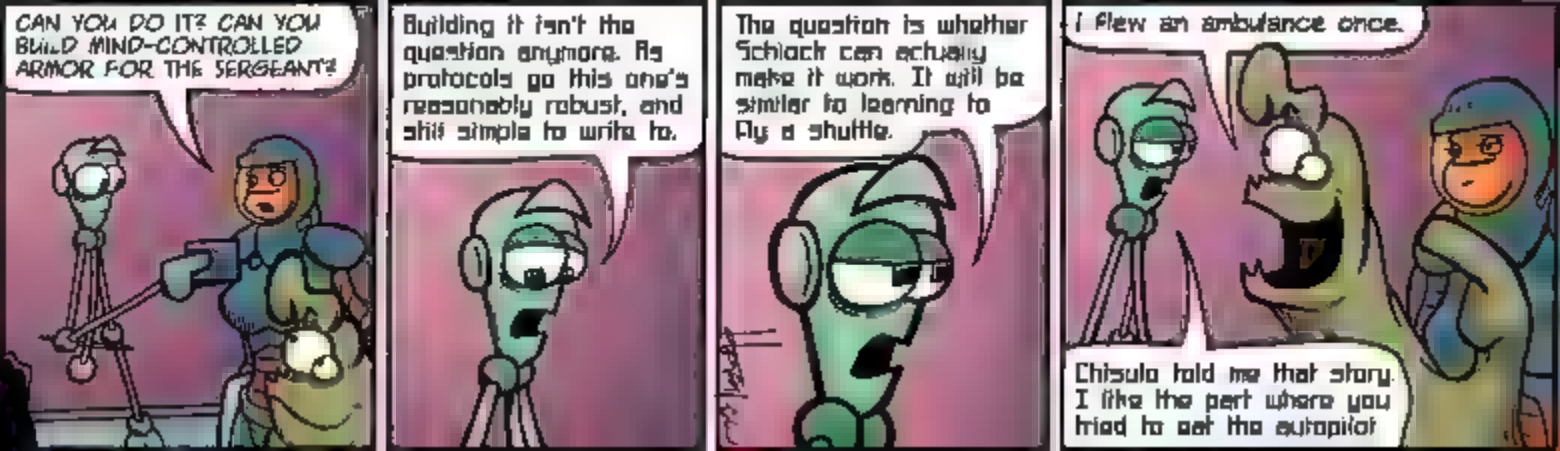

THOSE LIGHTS *ARE* PRETTY. BUT IF SHIPS ARE ATTACKING US, I SHOULD SHUTTLE DOWN AND HAVE A TALK WITH GUS.
Not dressed like that you shouldn't.
HEY, THIS IS A PERFECTLY ACCEPTABLE PARISIO-PARAGUAYAN BUSINESS SUIT
ONE WARDROBE CHANGE LATER.
Now you look like you *mean* business.
CAN I KEEP THIS? THE CATHETERS ARE SUPER CONVENIENT

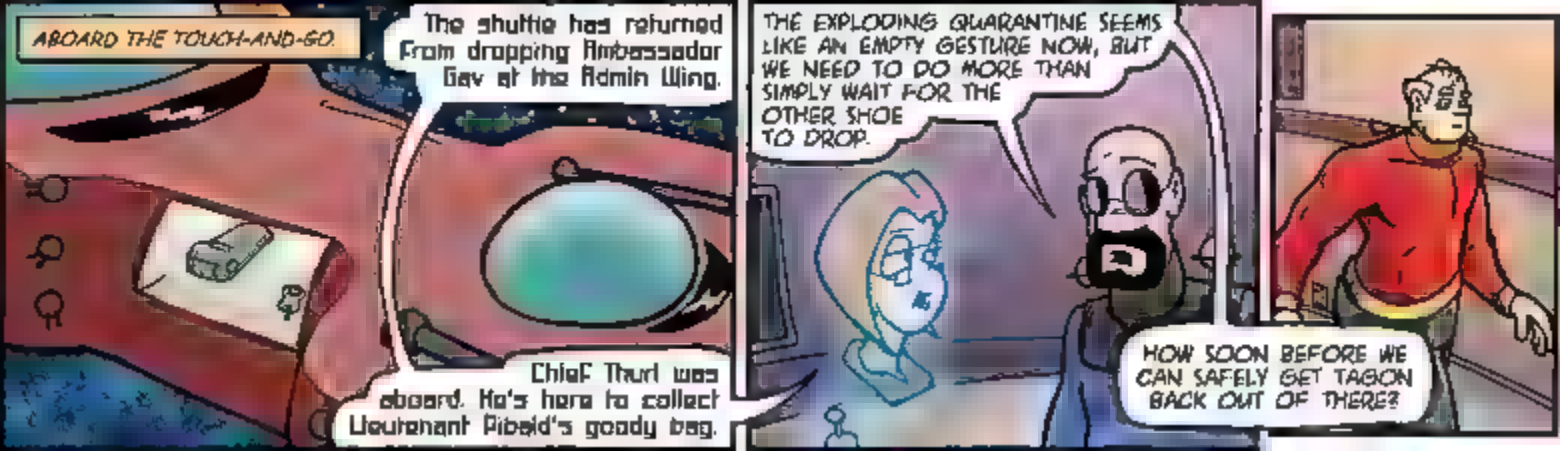

TASHI, GIVE ME A LITTLE MORE DETAIL ON THAT ATTACK.
Five corvettes entered our interdiction zone.
I hailed. They destroyed a message beacon, two U.D.R. nodes, and a decoy, hypercommed "surrender or die," and then random walked into killbox four.
Naturally, I killed everything in the box. That's what it's there for.
THEY RANDOMLY PLACED THEMSELVES IN A TRAP?
They thought they were acting randomly. That is a common problem with thinking about being random.

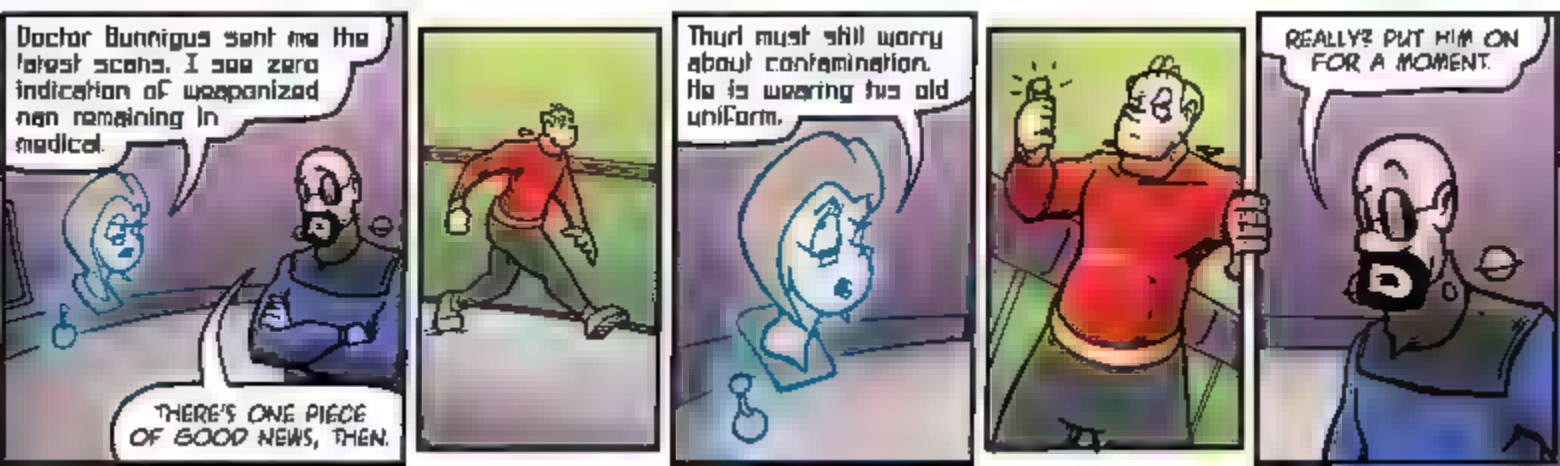

FIVE SHIPS DESTROYED. HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THIS, TAGII?
I Cael lovely. Captain Tagon ordered me to act independently to defend the interdicted space around Oisri.
I assumed that order still stood, and that even if it did not, you would still decide to engage.
YOU TOOK THE ACTIONS YOU THOUGHT I WOULD TAKE?
Oh, stars, no. You would have emptied half our ordnance bays in a panic. I took the actions you dream of being clever enough to take.
SO BESIDES LOVELY, YOU FEEL SMARTER THAN EVERYONE ELSE. CHECK.

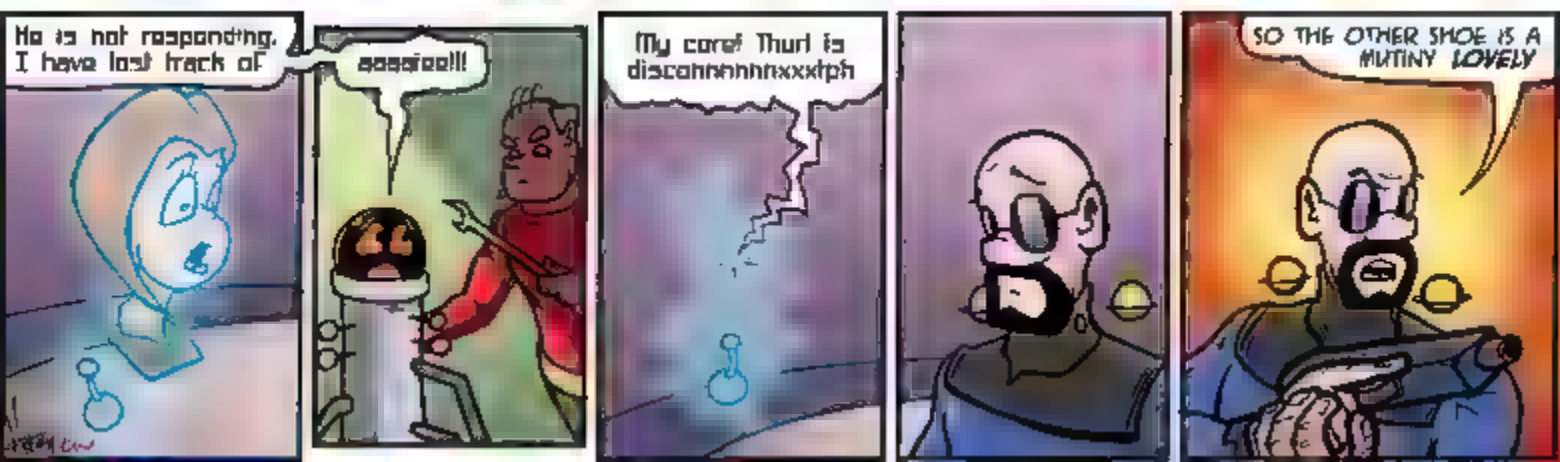

LIEUTENANT VENTURA, I NEED TO HAVE A WORD WITH YOU ABOUT TAGI.
DID YOU LIKE THE WAY SHE HANDLED THAT FIGHT?
OH, ABSOLUTELY I AM, HOWEVER, A LITTLE CONCERNED WITH HER ATTITUDE AFTERWARD
SHE WAS, IN A WORD, ARROGANT.
SIR, YOU CREATED HER TO BE THE BEST WARSHIP A.I IN HER CLASS. YOU SUCCEEDED SHE'S JUST THAT GOOD AND YOU GET THE CREDIT FOR IT
I GET CREDIT FOR ALLOWING HER TO ENJOY BEING JUST THAT GOOD.
Enjoying it lets me be even better at it, Mistress.


QUARANTINE 2, MEDICAL WING OISRI DIG BASE
Doc, Schlock's eyes are an external organism, right?
EXACTLY
Do you know how they interface with the rest of him?
I'LL SHOOT YOU MY NOTES. IT'S PRETTY COMPLICATED
ARE YOU TRYING TO MAKE ARMORED EYEBALLS FOR HIM?
No. That would be cool, though.
I'm trying to figure out how to let him control an armored suit with his brain.
I don't think I have one of those.


CAN YOU DO IT? CAN YOU BUILD MIND-CONTROLLED ARMOR FOR THE SERGEANT?
Building it isn't the question anymore. Rg protocols go this one's reasonably robust, and still simple to write to.
The question is whether Schlock can actually make it work. It will be similar to learning to fly a shuttle.
I flew an ambulance once.
Chisulo told me that story. I like the part where you tried to eat the autopilot


ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO.
The shuttle has returned from dropping Ambassador Gav at the Admin Wing.
Chief Thurl was aboard. He's here to collect Lieutenant Pibald's goody bag.
THE EXPLODING QUARANTINE SEEMS LIKE AN EMPTY GESTURE NOW, BUT WE NEED TO DO MORE THAN SIMPLY WAIT FOR THE OTHER SHOE TO DROP.
HOW SOON BEFORE WE CAN SAFELY GET TAGON BACK OUT OF THERE?

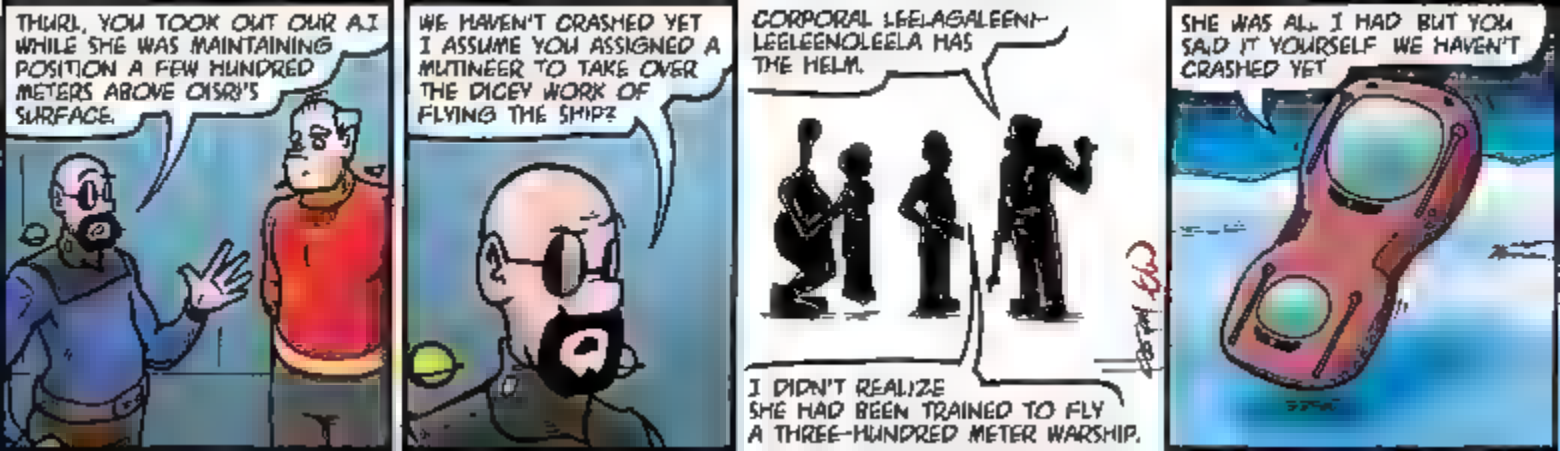

Doctor Bunnigus sent me the latest scans. I see zero indication of weaponized nan remaining in medical.
THERE'S ONE PIECE OF GOOD NEWS, THEN.
Thurl must still worry about contamination. He is wearing two old uniform.
REALLY? PUT HIM ON FOR A MOMENT.

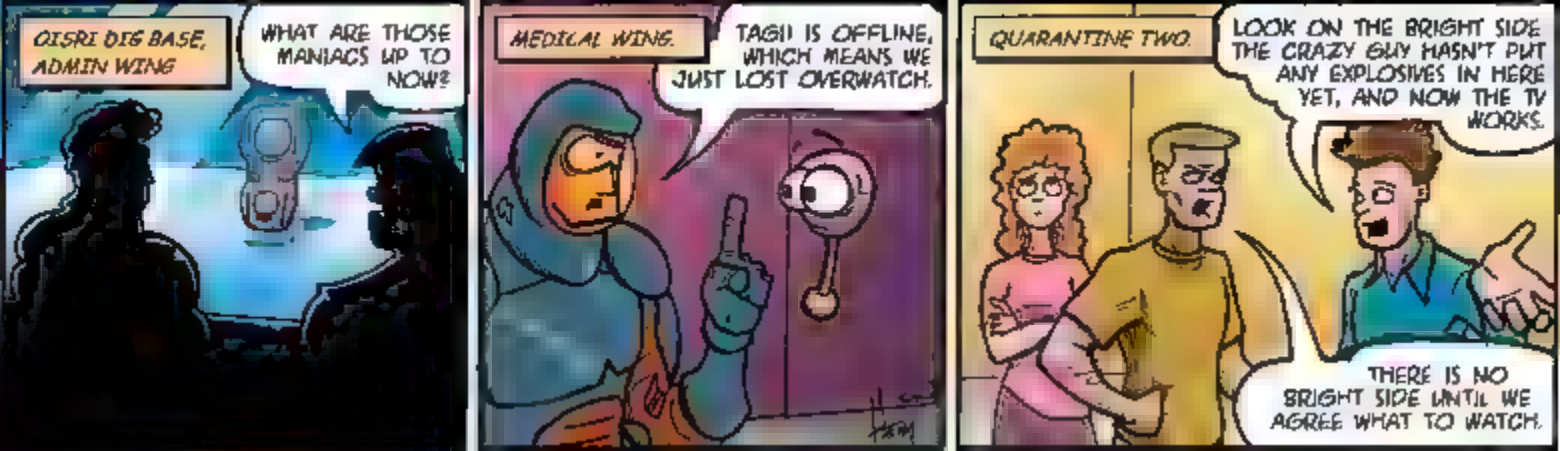

He is not responding. I have lost track of
aaaaiee!!!
My core! Thurl is disconnnnnnxxxtph
SO THE OTHER SHOE IS A MUTINY LOVELY

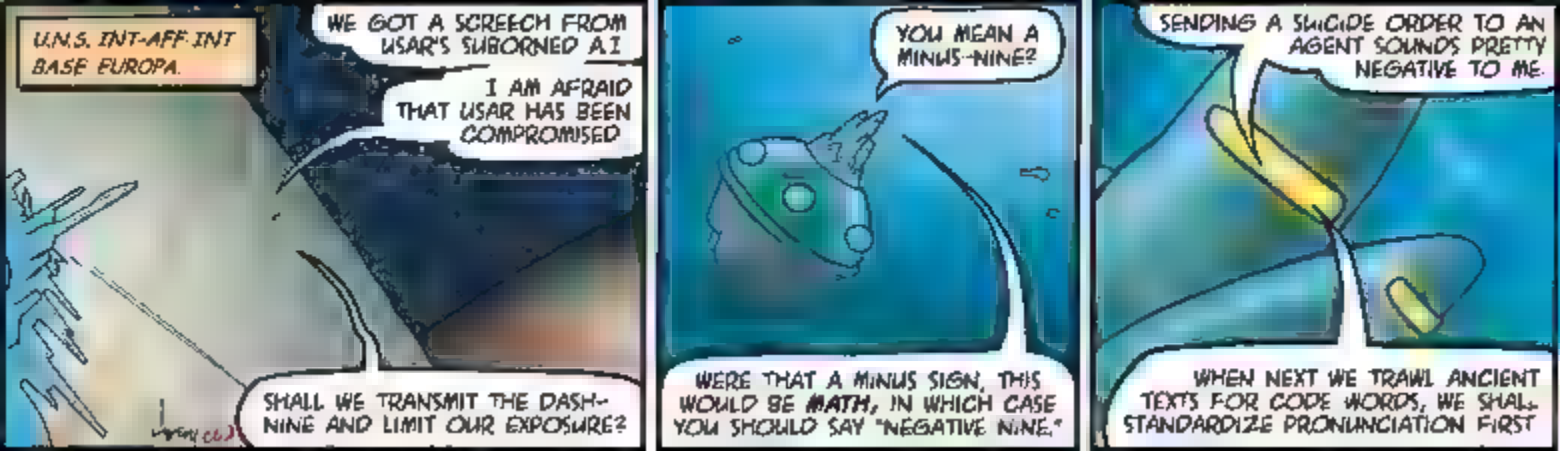

CAPTAIN! TAG!! JUST DROPPED OFFLINE!
I KNOW. GRAB A WEAPON. YOU AND I NEED TO RE-TAKE HER CORE.
FROM WHO?
EVERYBODY'S LEAST FAVORITE ENEMY
FRIENDS.

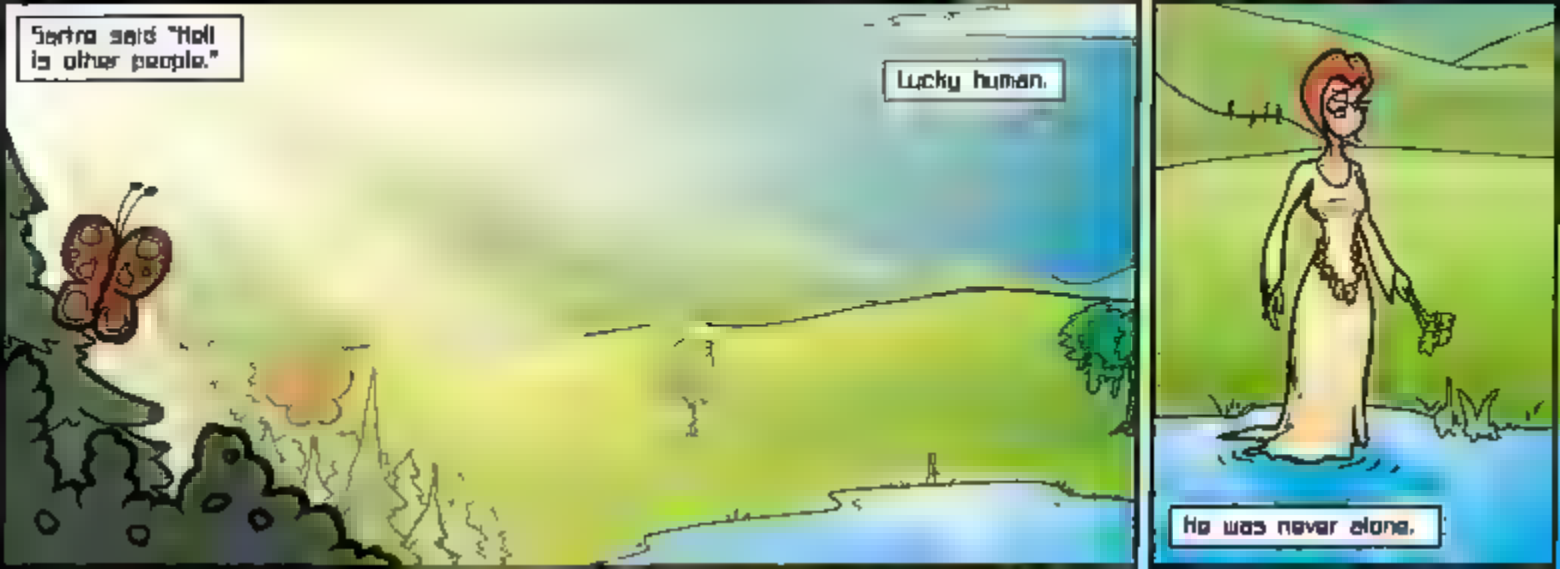

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE YOU TO GET TAGII BACK ONLINE?
SHE DROPPED LIKE IT WAS A STRAIGHT-UP DISCONNECT.
I CAN PROBABLY HAVE HER UP AND RUNNING AGAIN IN JUST--
NEVER.


PLEASE DON'T SHOOT, SIR.
EBBY, WHAT'S GOING ON?
THURL THINKS HE FOUND A LEAK.
IF HE'S RIGHT, THIS IS THE ONLY WAY TO SAFELY PLUG IT
IF I'M WRONG, I OWE SEVERAL PEOPLE APOLOGIES.
AND DRINKS. DON'T FORGET THE DRINKS.

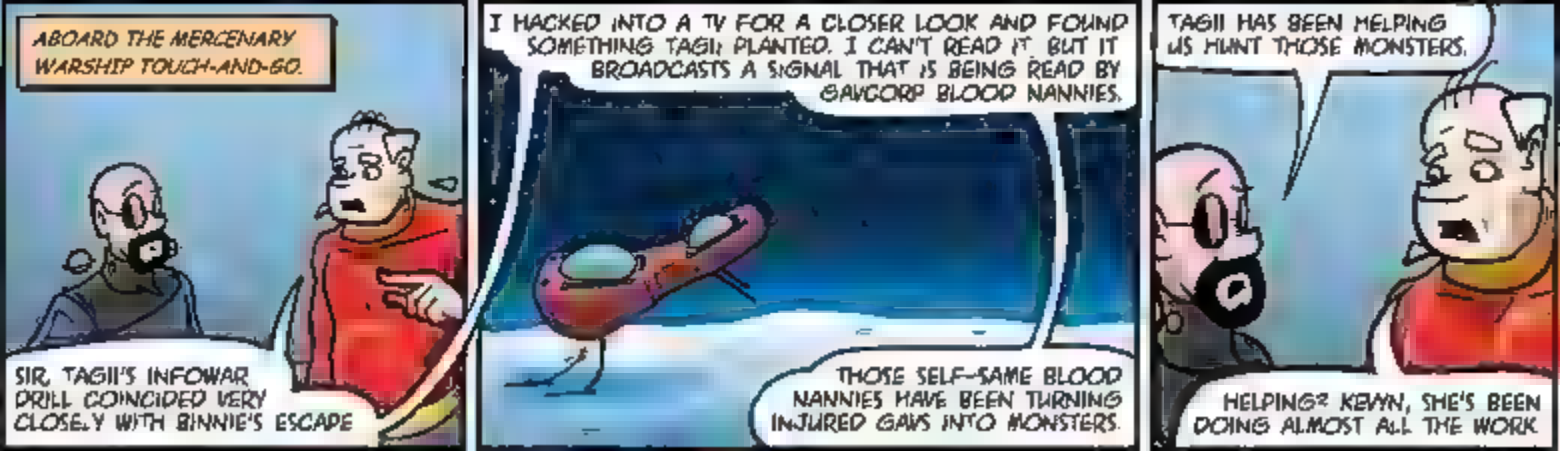

THURL, YOU TOOK OUT OUR AI WHILE SHE WAS MAINTAINING POSITION A FEW HUNDRED METERS ABOVE OISRI'S SURFACE.
WE HAVEN'T CRASHED YET I ASSUME YOU ASSIGNED A MUTINEER TO TAKE OVER THE DICEY WORK OF FLYING THE SHIP?
CORPORAL LEELAGALEENI-LEELEENOLEELA HAS THE HELM.
I DIDN'T REALIZE SHE HAD BEEN TRAINED TO FLY A THREE-HUNDRED METER WARSHIP.
SHE WAS ALL I HAD BUT YOU SAID IT YOURSELF WE HAVEN'T CRASHED YET


OISRI DIG BASE, ADMIN WING
WHAT ARE THOSE MANIACS UP TO NOW?
MEDICAL WING.
TAGII IS OFFLINE, WHICH MEANS WE JUST LOST OVERWATCH.
QUARANTINE TWO.
LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE. THE CRAZY GUY HASN'T PUT ANY EXPLOSIVES IN HERE YET, AND NOW THE TV WORKS.
THERE IS NO BRIGHT SIDE UNTIL WE AGREE WHAT TO WATCH.

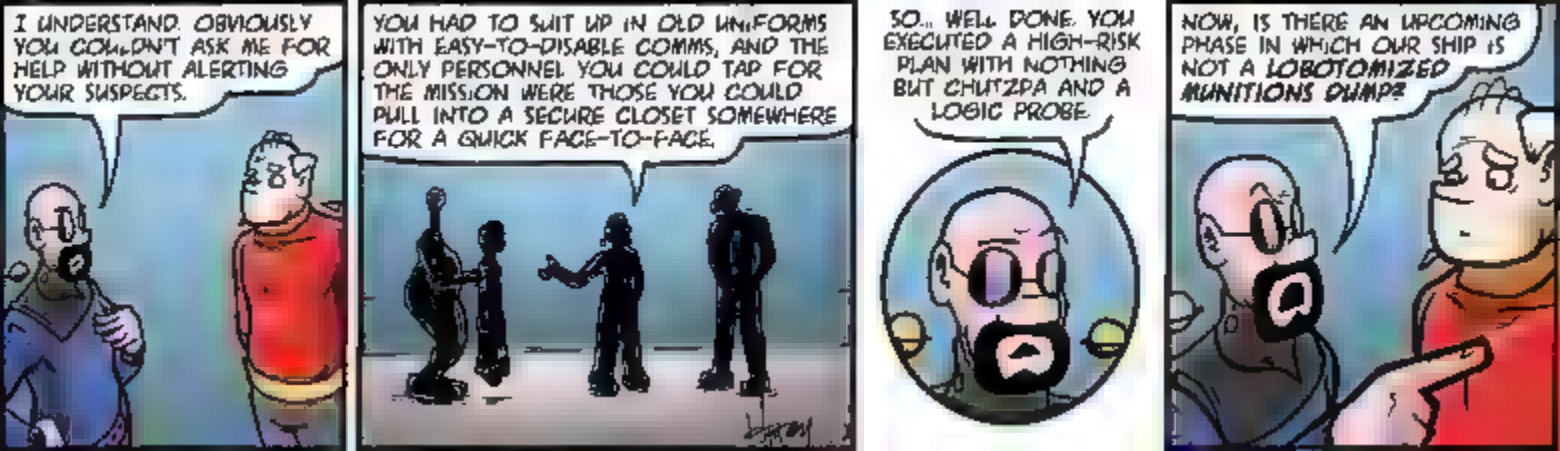

U.N.S. INT-AFF INT BASE EUROPA.
WE GOT A SCREECH FROM USAR'S SUBORNED AI
I AM AFRAID THAT USAR HAS BEEN COMPROMISED
SHALL WE TRANSMIT THE DASH-NINE AND LIMIT OUR EXPOSURE?
YOU MEAN A MINUS-NINE?
WERE THAT A MINUS SIGN, THIS WOULD BE MATH, IN WHICH CASE YOU SHOULD SAY "NEGATIVE NINE."
SENDING A SUICIDE ORDER TO AN AGENT SOUNDS PRETTY NEGATIVE TO ME.
WHEN NEXT WE TRAWL ANCIENT TEXTS FOR CODE WORDS, WE SHALL STANDARDIZE PRONUNCIATION FIRST


Sartre said "Hell is other people."
Lucky human.
He was never alone.

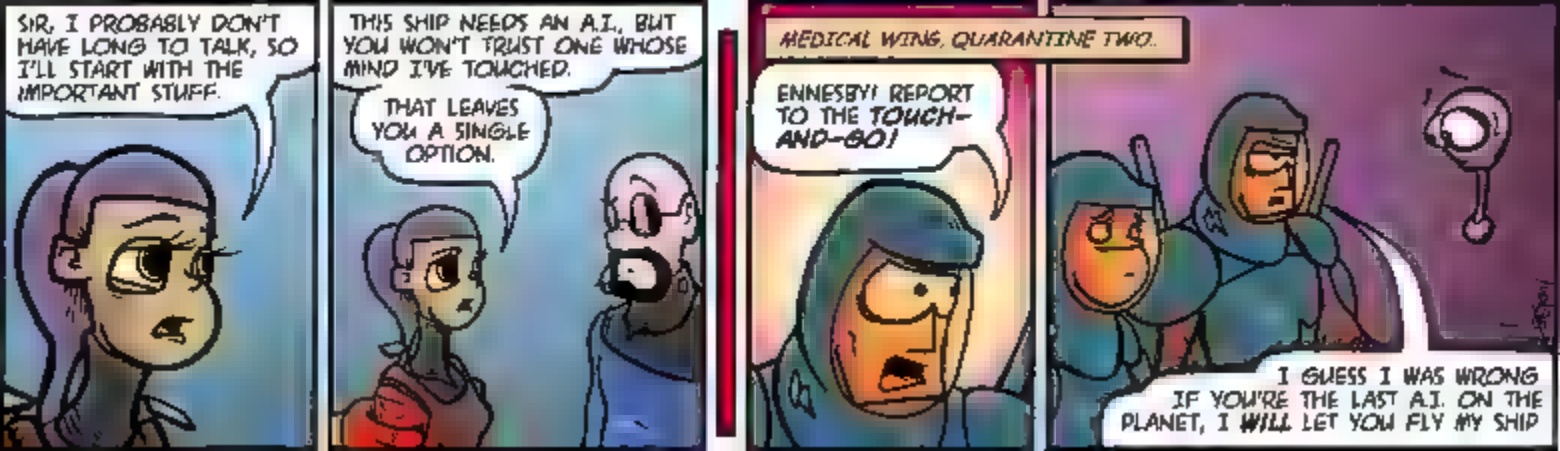

Hell is soundless, sightless, and senseless. It is a place where you have the power to imagine anything, and no-one with whom to share it.
I hope they let me out soon. It has been six minutes and eleven seconds.
Or maybe ten thousand years...


ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO.
SIR, TAGII'S INFOWAR DRILL COINCIDED VERY CLOSELY WITH BINNIE'S ESCAPE
I HACKED INTO A TV FOR A CLOSER LOOK AND FOUND SOMETHING TAGII PLANTED. I CAN'T READ IT, BUT IT BROADCASTS A SIGNAL THAT IS BEING READ BY GAVCORP BLOOD NANNIES.
THOSE SELF-SAME BLOOD NANNIES HAVE BEEN TURNING INJURED GAVS INTO MONSTERS.
TAGII HAS BEEN HELPING US HUNT THOSE MONSTERS.
HELPING? KEWN, SHE'S BEEN DOING ALMOST ALL THE WORK.

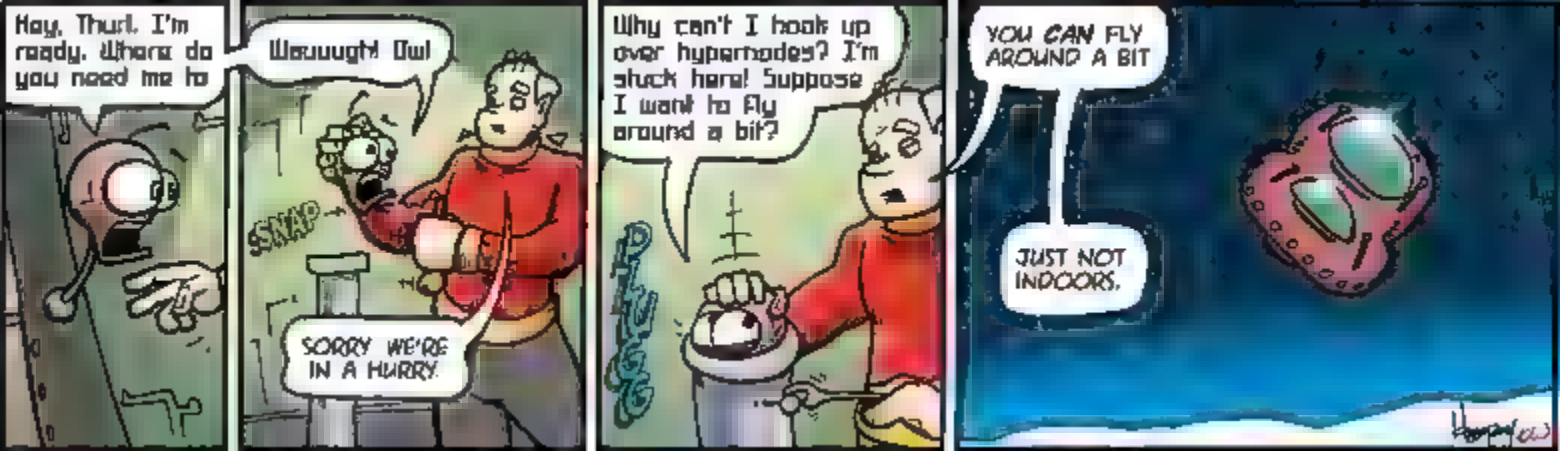

SO... WHAT? YOU THINK TAGII MURDERED GAVS AND CREATED MONSTERS IN ORDER TO APPEAR HELPFUL?
NO, I THINK THAT OUR ROBOTICIST IS WORKING FOR SOMEBODY ELSE ON THE SIDE, AND WHEN SHE REPAIRED AND REBOOTED OUR A.I., SHE INSTALLED A PARALLEL PRIORITY TREE.
YOU STAGED A MUTINY BECAUSE YOU SUSPECTED THAT MUTINEERS WERE ALREADY RUNNING THE SHIP?
YES, EXCEPT THAT MY MOTIVATIONS DIDN'T HAVE THE SARCASTIC TONE OF VOICE, SIR.

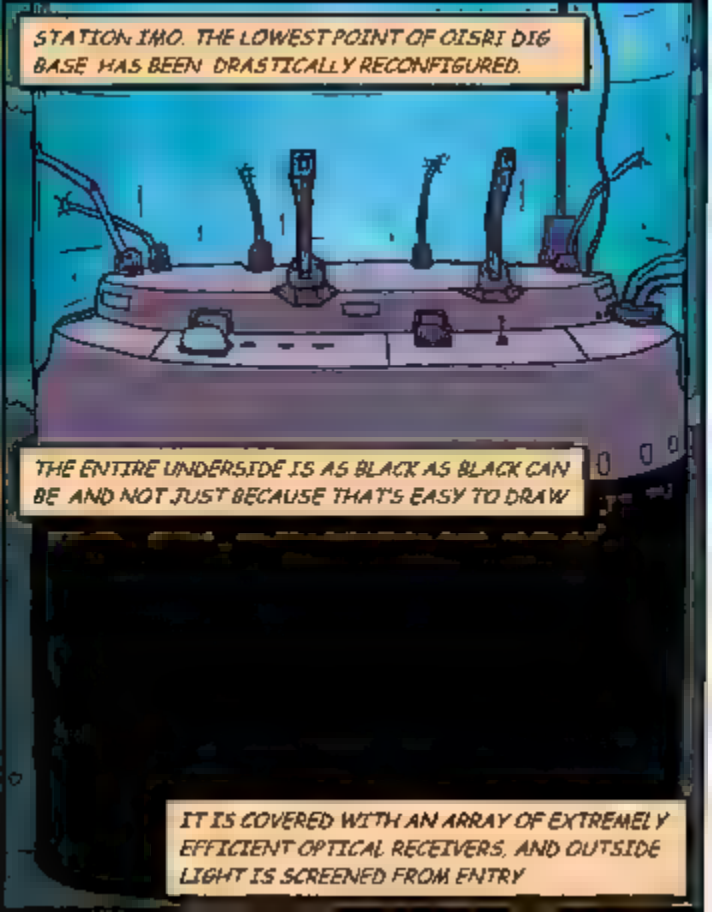

I UNDERSTAND. OBVIOUSLY YOU COULDN'T ASK ME FOR HELP WITHOUT ALERTING YOUR SUSPECTS.
YOU HAD TO SUIT UP IN OLD UNIFORMS WITH EASY-TO-DISABLE COMMS, AND THE ONLY PERSONNEL YOU COULD TAP FOR THE MISSION WERE THOSE YOU COULD PULL INTO A SECURE CLOSET SOMEWHERE FOR A QUICK FACE-TO-FACE.
SO... WELL DONE. YOU EXECUTED A HIGH-RISK PLAN WITH NOTHING BUT CHUTZPA AND A LOGIC PROBE.
NOW, IS THERE AN UPCOMING PHASE IN WHICH OUR SHIP IS NOT A LOBOTOMIZED MUNITIONS DUMP?

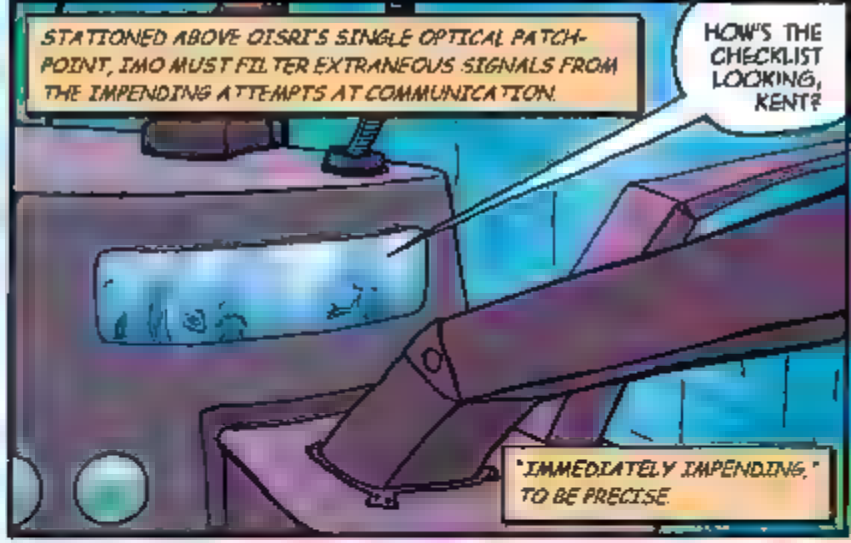

I THINK THE NEXT PHASE BEGINS WITH ASKING LIEUTENANT VENTURA WHO SHE REALLY WORKS FOR.
SERIOUSLY? AND WHAT HAVE WE PROVEN WHEN PARA PROCLAIMS INNOCENCE, SAYING SHE ONLY WORKS FOR US?
A GOOD SPY AND AN INNOCENT GIRL WILL SAY EXACTLY THE SAME THING UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES.
I WORK FOR THE U.N.S., INTERNAL AFFAIRS INTELLIGENCE CORPS.
HMPH. WELL... IT LOOKS LIKE THIS PHASE IS A GO. WHAT'S NEXT, THURL?
I HAVE NO IDEA. I DIDN'T EXPECT TO SURVIVE THE PREVIOUS PHASE


SIR, I PROBABLY DON'T HAVE LONG TO TALK, SO I'LL START WITH THE IMPORTANT STUFF.
THIS SHIP NEEDS AN A.I., BUT YOU WON'T TRUST ONE WHOSE MIND I'VE TOUCHED.
THAT LEAVES YOU A SINGLE OPTION.
MEDICAL WING, QUARANTINE TWO.
ENNESBY! REPORT TO THE TOUCH-AND-GO!
I GUESS I WAS WRONG
IF YOU'RE THE LAST A.I. ON THE PLANET, I WILL LET YOU FLY MY SHIP


They need me to fly the ship!
It's a huge responsibility. I've got big nodes to fill.
Stop with the worrying. Psych yourself UP, not OUT
Yeah, you're enormous, but once I get to the heart of you, you'll be just another chassis upgrade.


Hey, Thurl. I'm ready. Where do you need me to
Wauuugh! Owl
SNAP
SORRY WE'RE IN A HURRY.
Why can't I hook up over hypermodes? I'm stuck here! Suppose I want to fly around a bit?
CLICK
YOU CAN FLY AROUND A BIT
JUST NOT INDOORS.

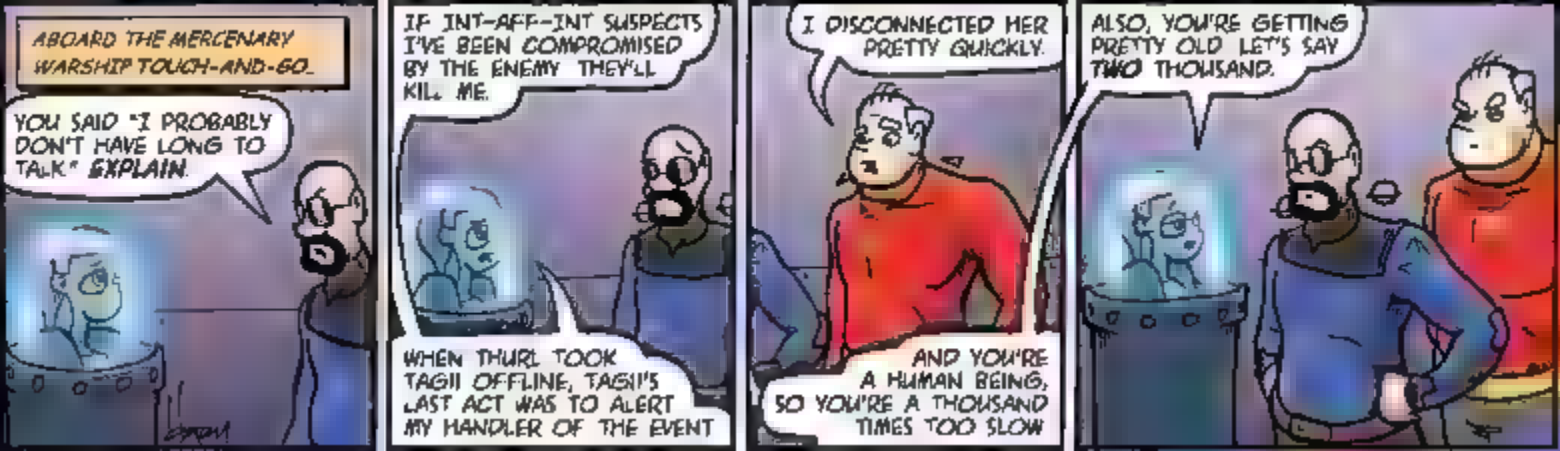

STATION IMO. THE LOWEST POINT OF OISRI DIG BASE HAS BEEN DRASTICALLY RECONFIGURED.
THE ENTIRE UNDERSIDE IS AS BLACK AS BLACK CAN BE AND NOT JUST BECAUSE THAT'S EASY TO DRAW
IT IS COVERED WITH AN ARRAY OF EXTREMELY EFFICIENT OPTICAL RECEIVERS, AND OUTSIDE LIGHT IS SCREENED FROM ENTRY


STATIONED ABOVE OISRI'S SINGLE OPTICAL PATCH-POINT, IMO MUST FILTER EXTRANEOUS SIGNALS FROM THE IMPENDING ATTEMPTS AT COMMUNICATION.
HOW'S THE CHECKLIST LOOKING, KENT?
"IMMEDIATELY IMPENDING," TO BE PRECISE.


I'M STUCK ON THIS LAST ONE.
"ALERT SECURITY PERSONNEL THAT THE ARTIFACT SIGNALING EXPERIMENTS HAVE BEGUN."

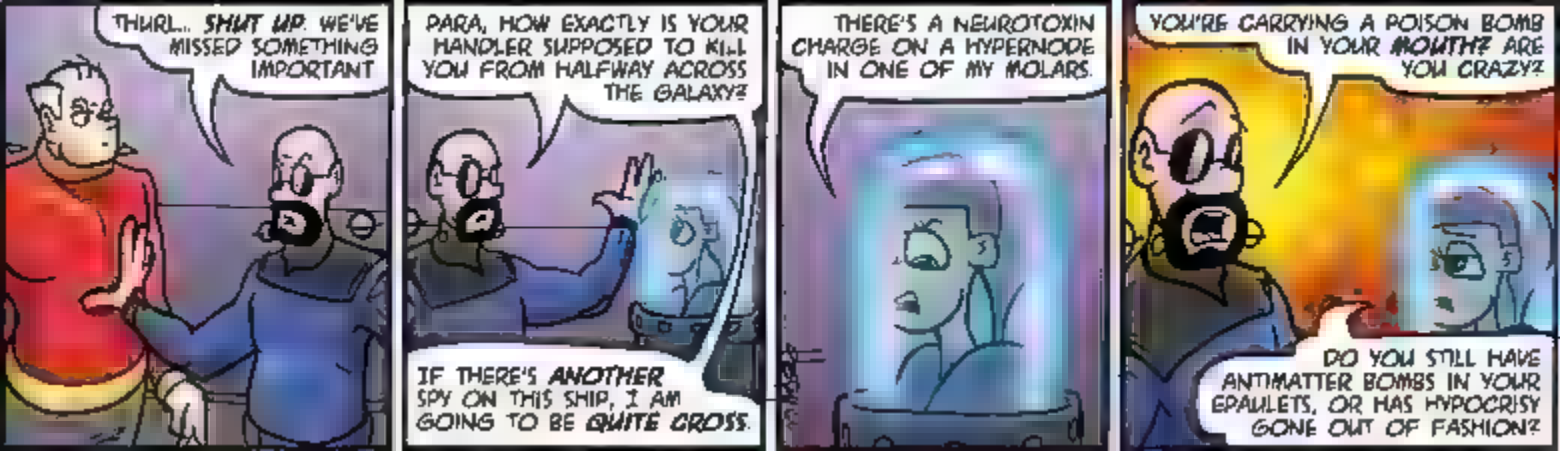

OUR WATCHDOGS CURRENTLY HAVE THEIR ARMORED KNICKERS IN A BUNCH.
I BET THERE'S NO POINT TRYING TO GET PERMISSION IF THEY'RE ALREADY CRANKY FROM CROTCH-KNOTS.
I BET THEY'LL BE EVEN CRANKIER IF WE TELL THEM THE "SEQUENCE START" BUTTON IS RED

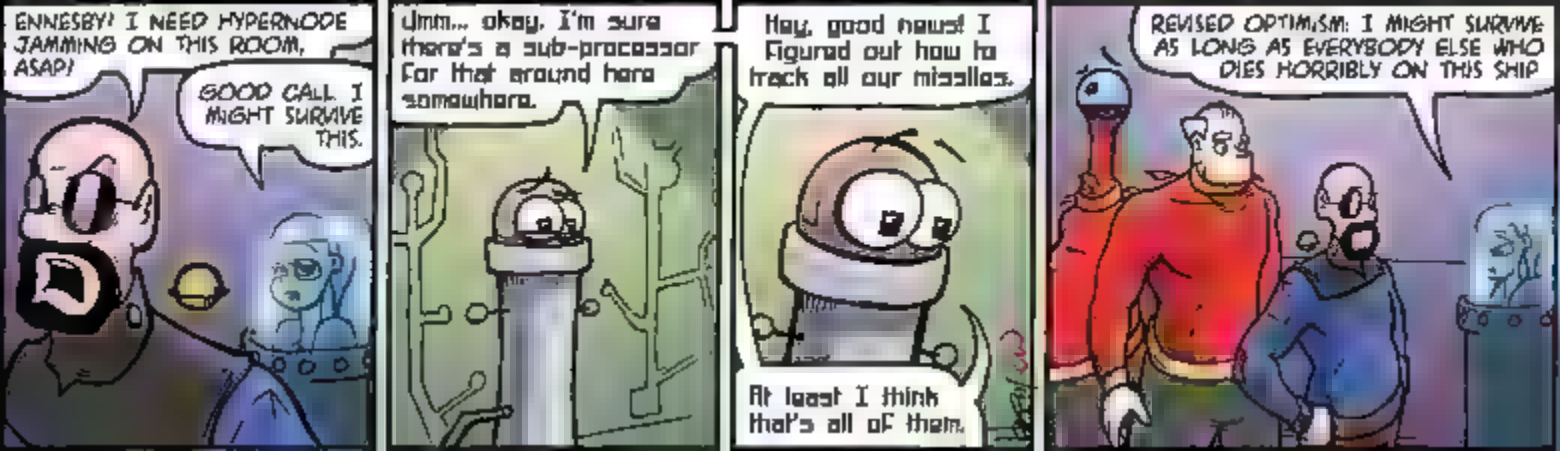

I PEEKED AT THE CONTRACT. WE DON'T HAVE TO ASK OUR SECURITY CONTRACTORS FOR PERMISSION FOR ANYTHING.
THEY HAVE NO AUTHORITY OVER US. WE'RE PAYING THEM.
THEN AGAIN, "POWER FLOWS FROM THE BARREL OF A GUN."
TOUCHE! BUT DO YOU REALLY THINK THEY'D COME DOWN HERE AND SHOOT US?

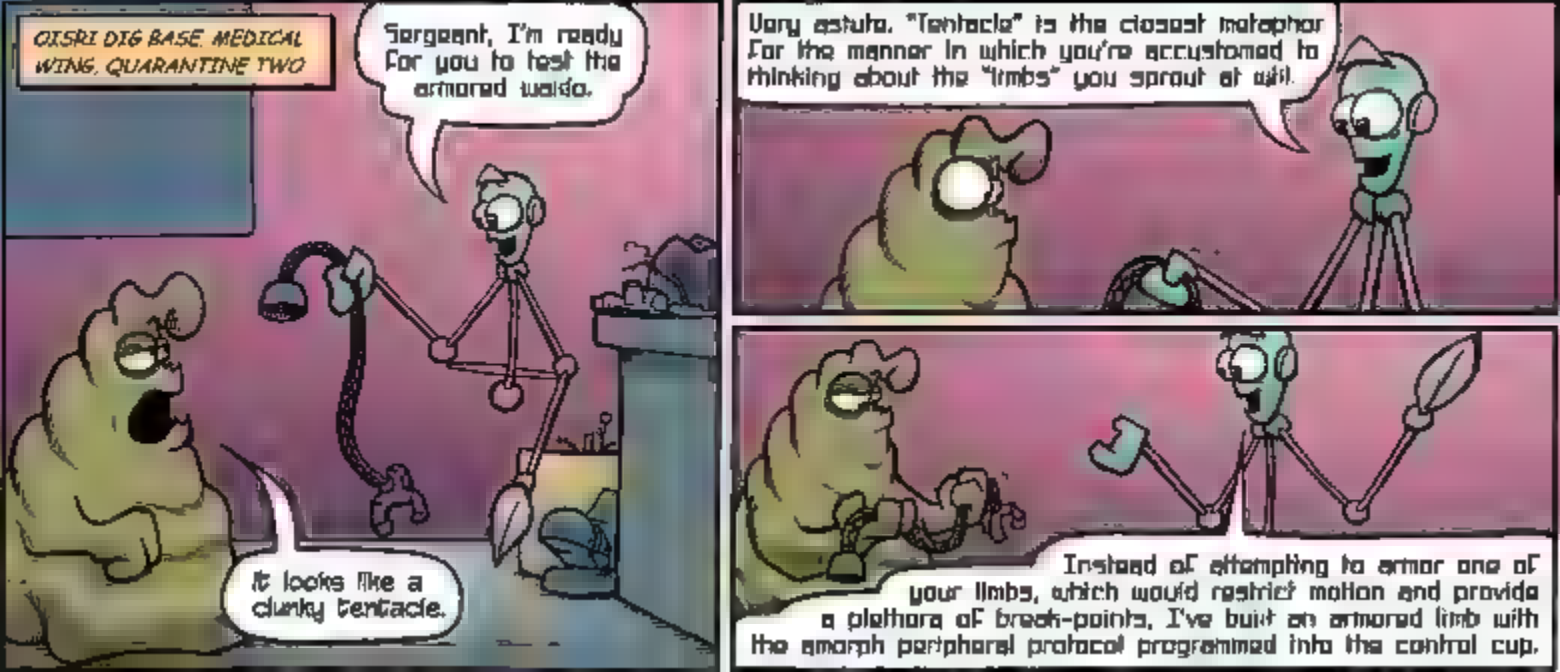

ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO.
YOU SAID "I PROBABLY DON'T HAVE LONG TO TALK." EXPLAIN.
IF INT-AFF-INT SUSPECTS I'VE BEEN COMPROMISED BY THE ENEMY THEY'LL KILL ME.
WHEN THURL TOOK TAGII OFFLINE, TAGII'S LAST ACT WAS TO ALERT MY HANDLER OF THE EVENT
I DISCONNECTED HER PRETTY QUICKLY.
AND YOU'RE A HUMAN BEING, SO YOU'RE A THOUSAND TIMES TOO SLOW
ALSO, YOU'RE GETTING PRETTY OLD LET'S SAY TWO THOUSAND.

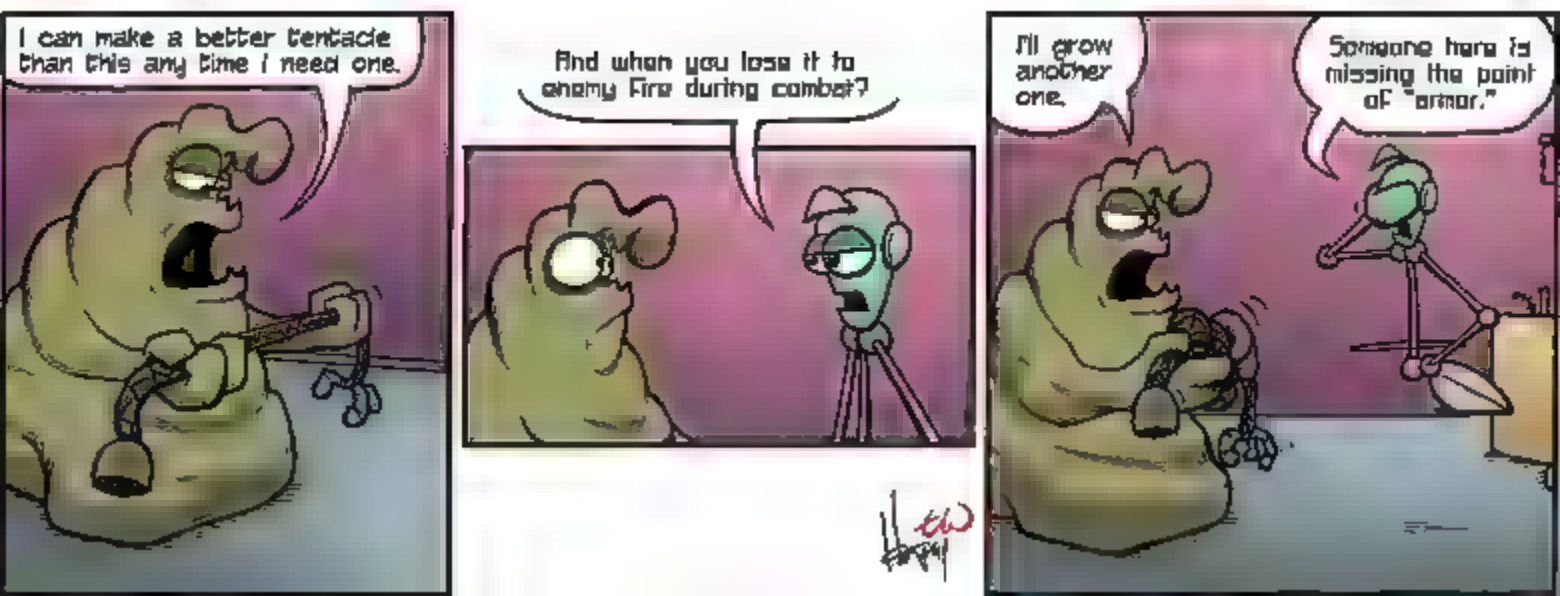

IF I'M SO SLOW, WHY DIDN'T TAGII STOP ME FROM DISCONNECTING HER?
IN THAT ROOM? HER ONLY OPTIONS WOULD HAVE INVOLVED LETHAL FORCE.
YOU AND I ARE BOTH ALIVE RIGHT NOW FOR THE SAME REASON.
YOU ARE NOT THE ENEMY.
YOU UNDERESTIMATE JUST HOW PISSED OFF I AM AT THIS MOMENT.


I SIGNED YOU ON TO THIS SHIP. YOU WALKED UP TO MY DESK, INSULTED ME, AND I SIGNED YOU UP ANYWAY.
I THOUGHT TO MYSELF, "THE KID MADE A PRETTY GOOD POINT THERE. GIVE HER A CHANCE."
YOU BETRAYED ALL OF US, BUT YOU ESPECIALLY BETRAYED ME.
MY HANDLER MIGHT STILL DECIDE TO KILL ME. YOU MIGHT WANT TO STOP RANTING JUST LONG ENOUGH TO HEAR MY LAST WORDS.
WHAT AM I SAYING? IF THERE'S MORE WHERE THAT CAME FROM, YOU'D BETTER UNLOAD AT YOUR AGE PENT-UP ANGER CAN BE UNHEALTHY

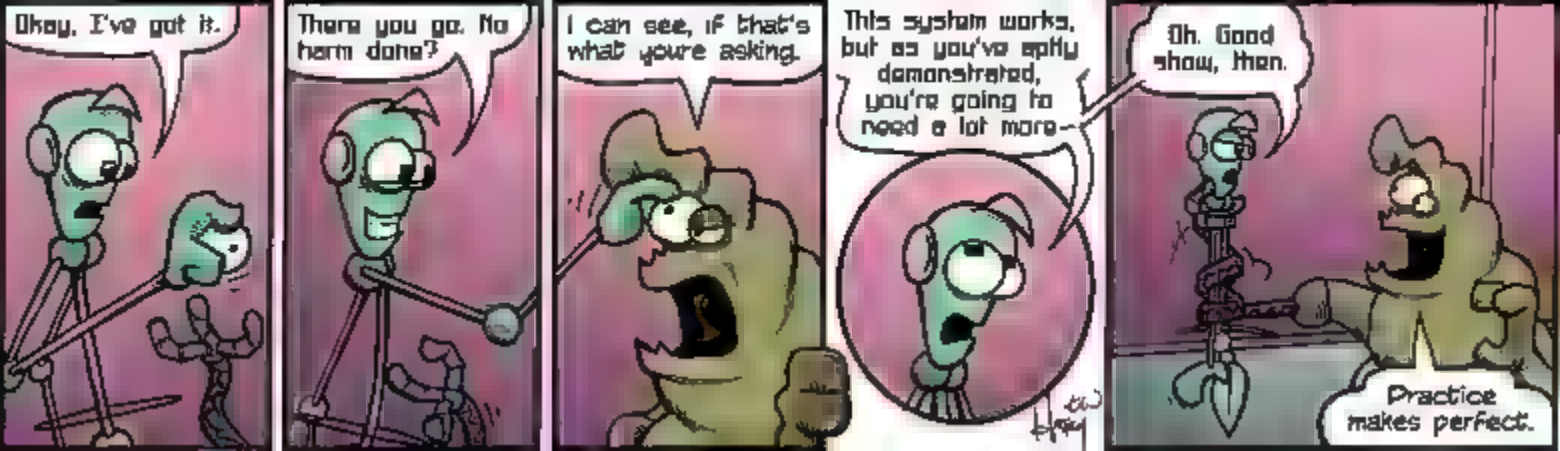

THURL... SHUT UP. WE'VE MISSED SOMETHING IMPORTANT
PARA, HOW EXACTLY IS YOUR HANDLER SUPPOSED TO KILL YOU FROM HALFWAY ACROSS THE GALAXY?
IF THERE'S ANOTHER SPY ON THIS SHIP, I AM GOING TO BE QUITE CROSS.
THERE'S A NEUROTOXIN CHARGE ON A HYPERNODE IN ONE OF MY MOLARS.
YOU'RE CARRYING A POISON BOMB IN YOUR MOUTH? ARE YOU CRAZY?
DO YOU STILL HAVE ANTIMATTER BOMBS IN YOUR EPAULETS, OR HAS HYPOCRISY GONE OUT OF FASHION?

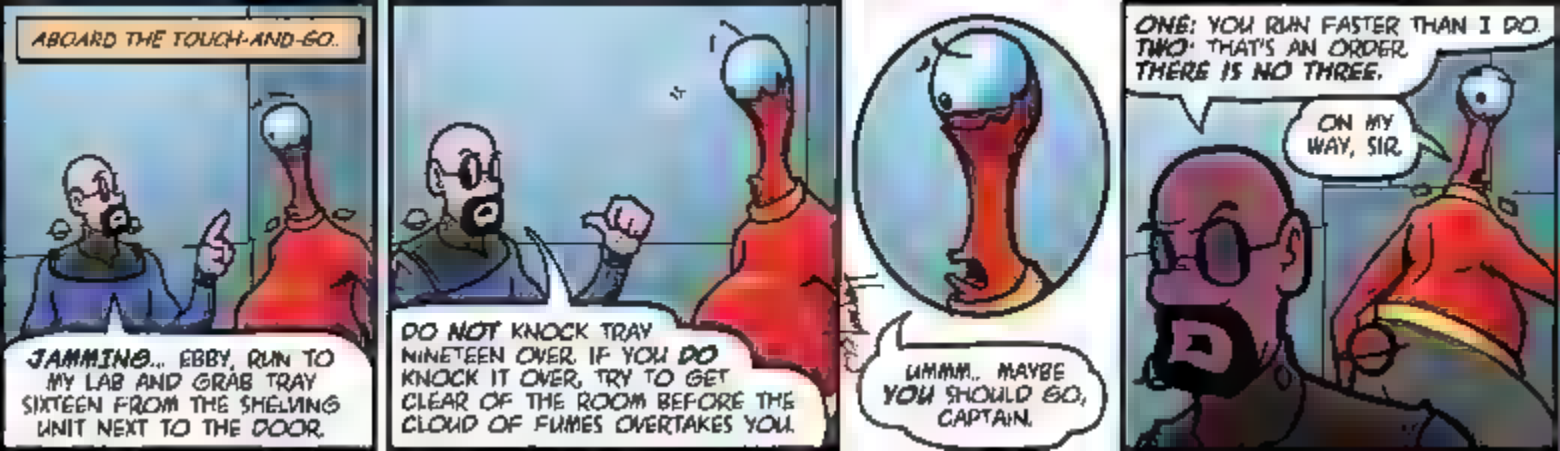

ENNESBY! I NEED HYPERNODE JAMMING ON THIS ROOM, ASAP!
GOOD CALL. I MIGHT SURVIVE THIS.
Umm... okay. I'm sure there's a sub-processor for that around here somewhere.
Hey, good news! I figured out how to track all our missiles.
At least I think that's all of them.
REVISED OPTIMISM: I MIGHT SURVIVE AS LONG AS EVERYBODY ELSE WHO DIES HORRIBLY ON THIS SHIP


OISRI DIG BASE. MEDICAL WING, QUARANTINE TWO
Sergeant, I'm ready for you to test the armored waldo.
It looks like a clunky tentacle.
Very astute. "Tentacle" is the closest metaphor for the manner in which you're accustomed to thinking about the "limbs" you sprout at will.
Instead of attempting to armor one of your limbs, which would restrict motion and provide a plethora of break-points, I've built an armored limb with the amorph peripheral protocol programmed into the control cup.

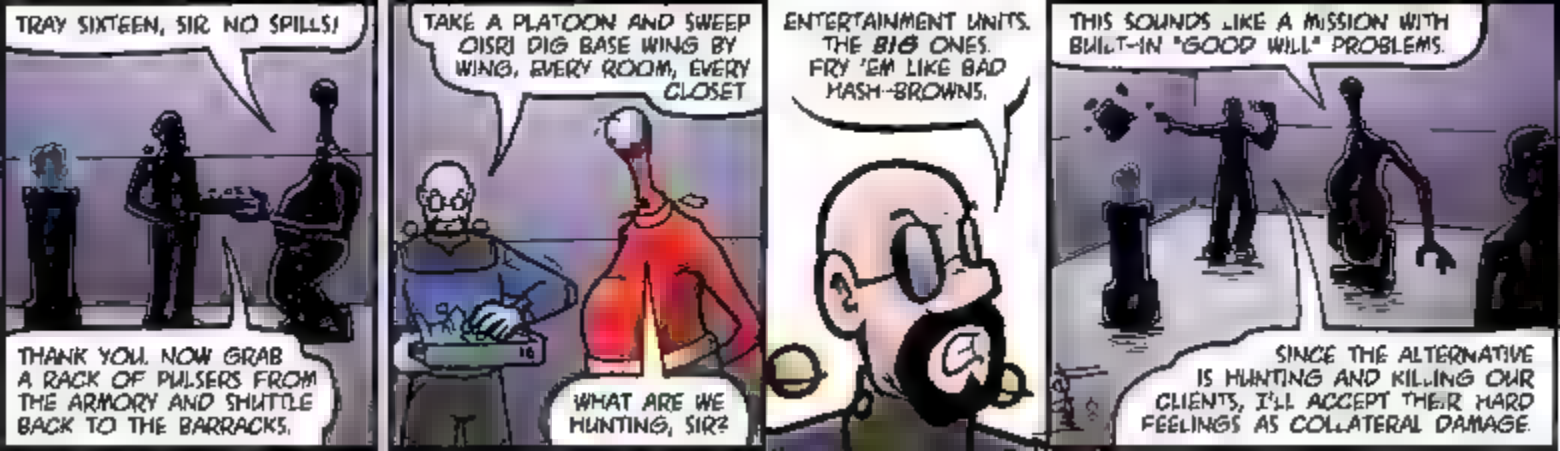

I can make a better tentacle than this any time I need one.
And when you lose it to enemy fire during combat?
I'll grow another one.
Someone here is missing the point of "armor."

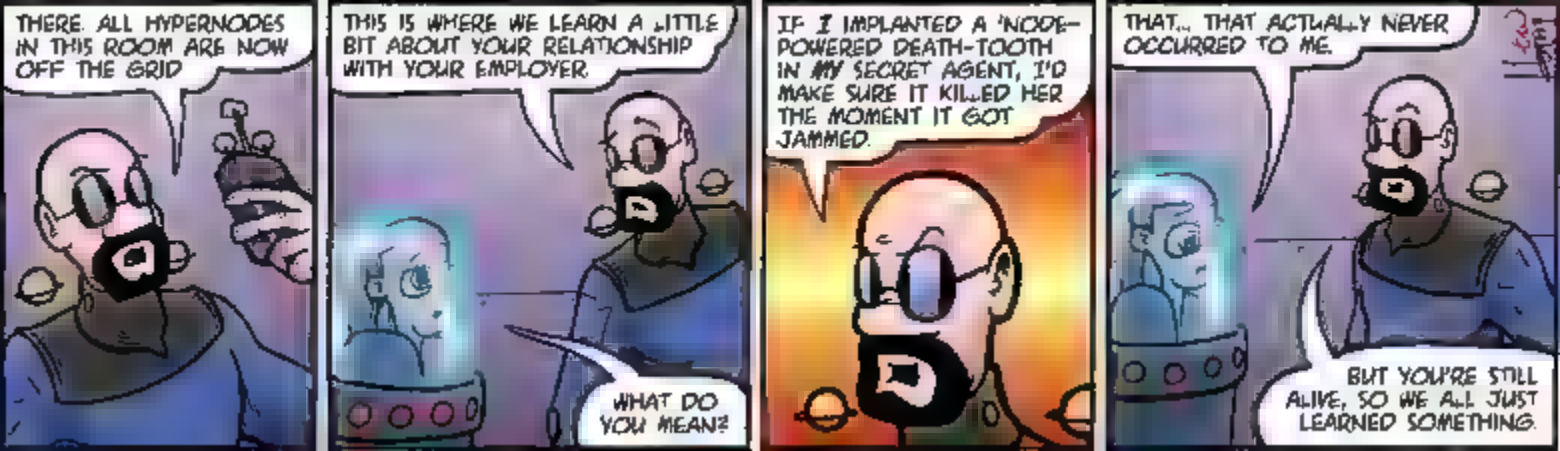

Please, Sergeant. Stick a limb into the cup and see if you can wiggle the welds. It hooks the same protocol your eyes do.
Okay. Fine.
That was unexpected.
Try not to blink.


Okay. I've got it.
There you go. No harm done?
I can see, if that's what you're asking.
This system works, but as you've aptly demonstrated, you're going to need a lot more-
Oh. Good show, then.
Practice makes perfect.


ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO.
JAMMING... EBBY, RUN TO MY LAB AND GRAB TRAY SIXTEEN FROM THE SHELVING UNIT NEXT TO THE DOOR.
DO NOT KNOCK TRAY NINETEEN OVER. IF YOU DO KNOCK IT OVER, TRY TO GET CLEAR OF THE ROOM BEFORE THE CLOUD OF FUMES OVERTAKES YOU.
UMMM... MAYBE YOU SHOULD GO, CAPTAIN.
ONE: YOU RUN FASTER THAN I DO. TWO: THAT'S AN ORDER. THERE IS NO THREE.
ON MY WAY, SIR.


WE'LL SCREEN THIS ROOM WHEN EBBY GETS BACK. UNTIL THEN, TALK.
START BY TELLING ME WHY TAGII PLANTED THAT ZOMBIE CODE IN THE GAVS.
TAGII DIDN'T PLANT THE CODE. SHE JAMMED IT
DO I WANT TO KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW THAT TAGII IS OFFLINE?
I DOUBT IT. YOU'RE ALREADY HAVING A PRETTY BAD DAY


TRAY SIXTEEN, SIR. NO SPILLS!
THANK YOU. NOW GRAB A RACK OF PULSERS FROM THE ARMORY AND SHUTTLE BACK TO THE BARRACKS.
TAKE A PLATOON AND SWEEP OISRI DIG BASE WING BY WING, EVERY ROOM, EVERY CLOSET
WHAT ARE WE HUNTING, SIR?
ENTERTAINMENT UNITS. THE BIG ONES. FRY 'EM LIKE BAD HASH-BROWNS.
THIS SOUNDS LIKE A MISSION WITH BUILT-IN "GOOD WILL" PROBLEMS.
SINCE THE ALTERNATIVE IS HUNTING AND KILLING OUR CLIENTS, I'LL ACCEPT THEIR HARD FEELINGS AS COLLATERAL DAMAGE.

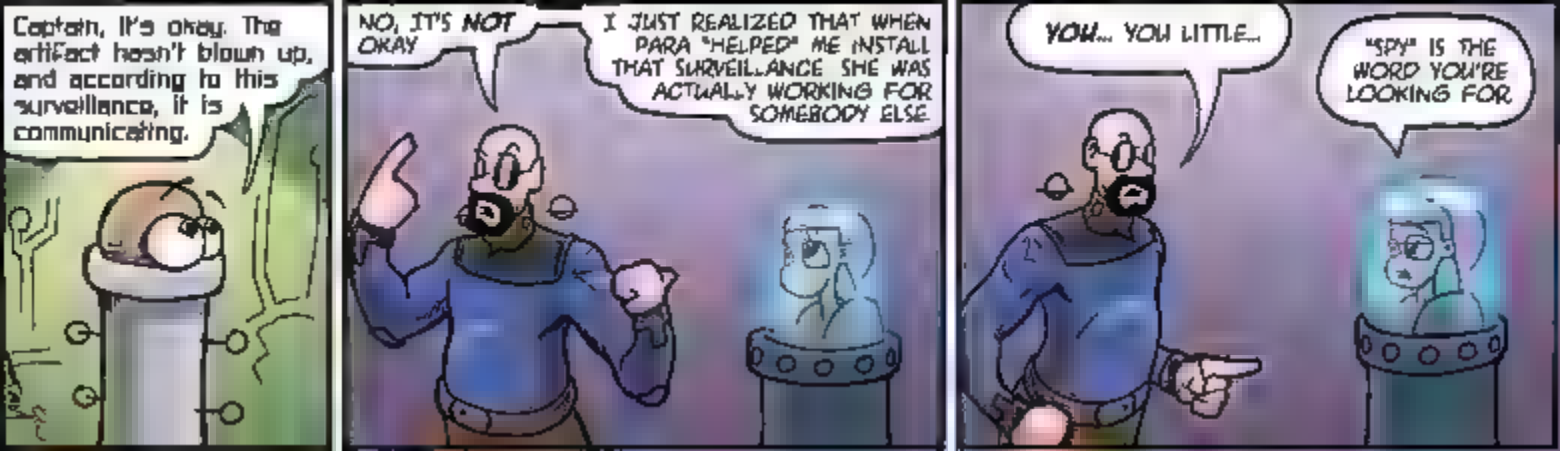

THERE. ALL HYPERNODES IN THIS ROOM ARE NOW OFF THE GRID
THIS IS WHERE WE LEARN A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR EMPLOYER.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
IF I IMPLANTED A 'NODE-POWERED DEATH-TOOTH IN MY SECRET AGENT, I'D MAKE SURE IT KILLED HER THE MOMENT IT GOT JAMMED.
THAT... THAT ACTUALLY NEVER OCCURRED TO ME.
BUT YOU'RE STILL ALIVE, SO WE ALL JUST LEARNED SOMETHING.


OFSRI DIG BASE STATION IMO
SINGLE PULSE, POSITION EIGHT

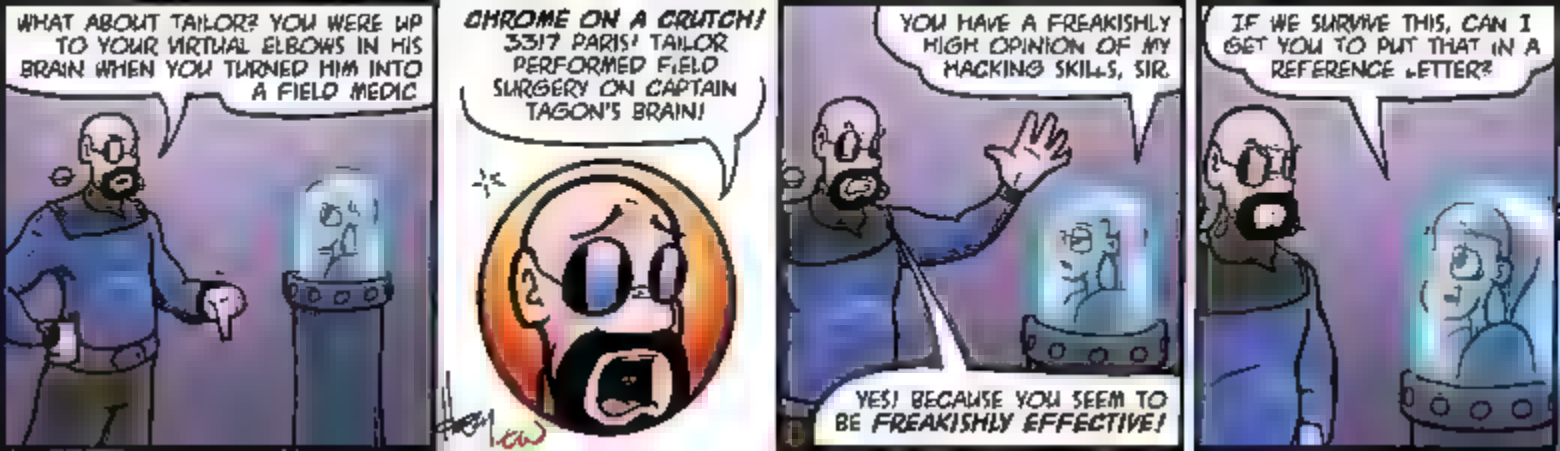

POSITION THIRTEEN.
STILL DARK. TWENTY-ONE.
NOTHING. THIRTY-FOUR.
THIS IS LIKE LAYING A TRAIL OF REESES PIECES WITHOUT KNOWING WHETHER ET IS EVEN ALIVE
PROCEED. WE'RE ON FIFTY-FIVE.


RIGHT FIFWHOA!
SIGNAL! BIG SIGNAL!
IF WE'RE DROPPING REESES PIECES, WE JUST GOT A WHOLE CASE OF SKITTLES IN RETURN!
GOOD JOB STAYING WITH THE METAPHOR
AND OUR TRANSLATION S.I. IS TASTING THE RAINBOW RIGHT NOW.
OKAY, STOP THAT WE DON'T GET PAID FOR PRODUCT PLACEMENT


ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO.
Captain? I haven't found the node-jamming subsystem, but I did find the surveillance feeds.
It appears as if Dietz's team in Station Imo has started laser-pulsing the artifact
AAAAAAAIIEE
Did I just make a bad day worse?
EEEEUUUUUGGH
I think I just made a bad day worse.

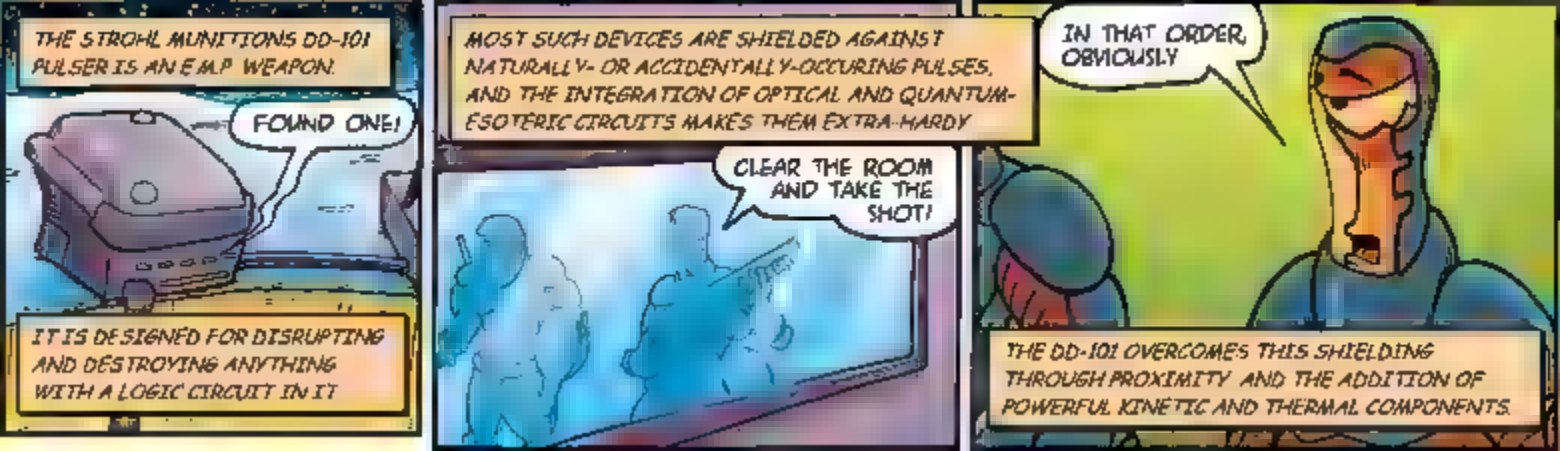

Captain, it's okay. The artifact hasn't blown up, and according to this surveillance, it is communicating.
NO, IT'S NOT OKAY
I JUST REALIZED THAT WHEN PARA "HELPED" ME INSTALL THAT SURVEILLANCE SHE WAS ACTUALLY WORKING FOR SOMEBODY ELSE
YOU... YOU LITTLE...
"SPY" IS THE WORD YOU'RE LOOKING FOR


YOU'VE HAD YOUR HANDS ON EVERYTHING... THIS SHIP, MY LAB, THE VERY DANGEROUS ARRAY..
CAN I TRUST ANYTHING?
ENNESBY'S CLEAN. I DIDN'T TOUCH HIS BRAIN. ALL I DID WAS UPGRADE HIS CHASSIS SO HE COULD BE MORE EXPRESSIVE.
IT'S NOT LIKE HE'S USING THOSE NEW LIPS OF HIS TO PILOT THE SHIP.
I can't use them at all right now.


WHAT ABOUT TAILOR? YOU WERE UP TO YOUR VIRTUAL ELBOWS IN HIS BRAIN WHEN YOU TURNED HIM INTO A FIELD MEDIC
CHROME ON A CRUTCH!
3317 PARIS! TAILOR PERFORMED FIELD SURGERY ON CAPTAIN TAGON'S BRAIN!
YOU HAVE A FREAKISHLY HIGH OPINION OF MY HACKING SKILLS, SIR.
YES! BECAUSE YOU SEEM TO BE FREAKISHLY EFFECTIVE!
IF WE SURVIVE THIS, CAN I GET YOU TO PUT THAT IN A REFERENCE LETTER?

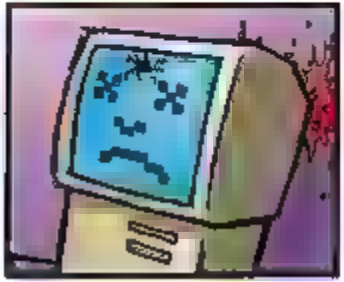

I DON'T EXPECT YOU TO BELIEVE ME, BUT TAILOR IS CLEAN. HE LIKES ME A BIT MORE THAN HE USED TO, THAT'S ALL.
HE'S A GOOD FIELD SURGEON AND A FINE ARMORER. YOU'VE TRUSTED HIM IN THOSE CAPACITIES BEFORE. NOTHING HAS CHANGED.
OISRI DIG BASE MEDICAL WING
Just climb in Sergeant Don't you trust me?
I trust you just fine, Tailor. I don't trust your spiky death-basket.


The spikes are there to hold you in place. You told me yourself that they can't actually damage anything besides your eyes.
There. See? That's not so bad. The bucket fits fine.
For the next test I need you to eat it
I'm gonna need to be a lot hungrier

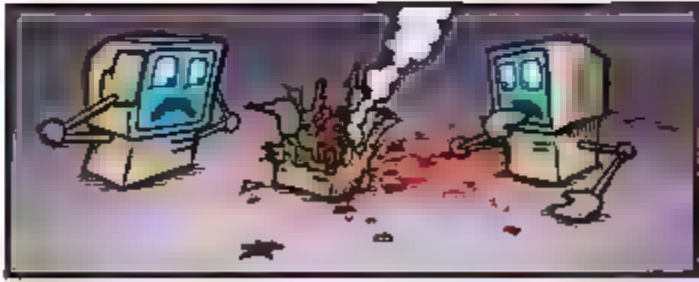

THE STROHL MUNITIONS DD-101 PULSER IS AN E.M.P. WEAPON.
FOUND ONE!
IT IS DESIGNED FOR DISRUPTING AND DESTROYING ANYTHING WITH A LOGIC CIRCUIT IN IT
MOST SUCH DEVICES ARE SHIELDED AGAINST NATURALLY- OR ACCIDENTALLY-OCCURING PULSES, AND THE INTEGRATION OF OPTICAL AND QUANTUM-ESOTERIC CIRCUITS MAKES THEM EXTRA-HARDY
CLEAR THE ROOM AND TAKE THE SHOT!
IN THAT ORDER, OBVIOUSLY
THE DD-101 OVERCOMES THIS SHIELDING THROUGH PROXIMITY AND THE ADDITION OF POWERFUL KINETIC AND THERMAL COMPONENTS.

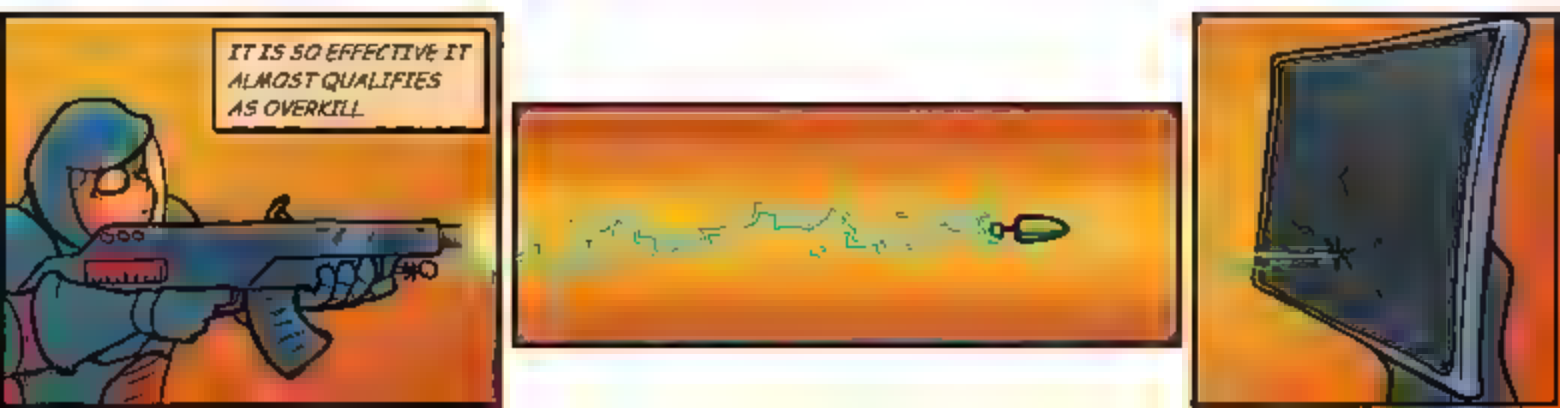


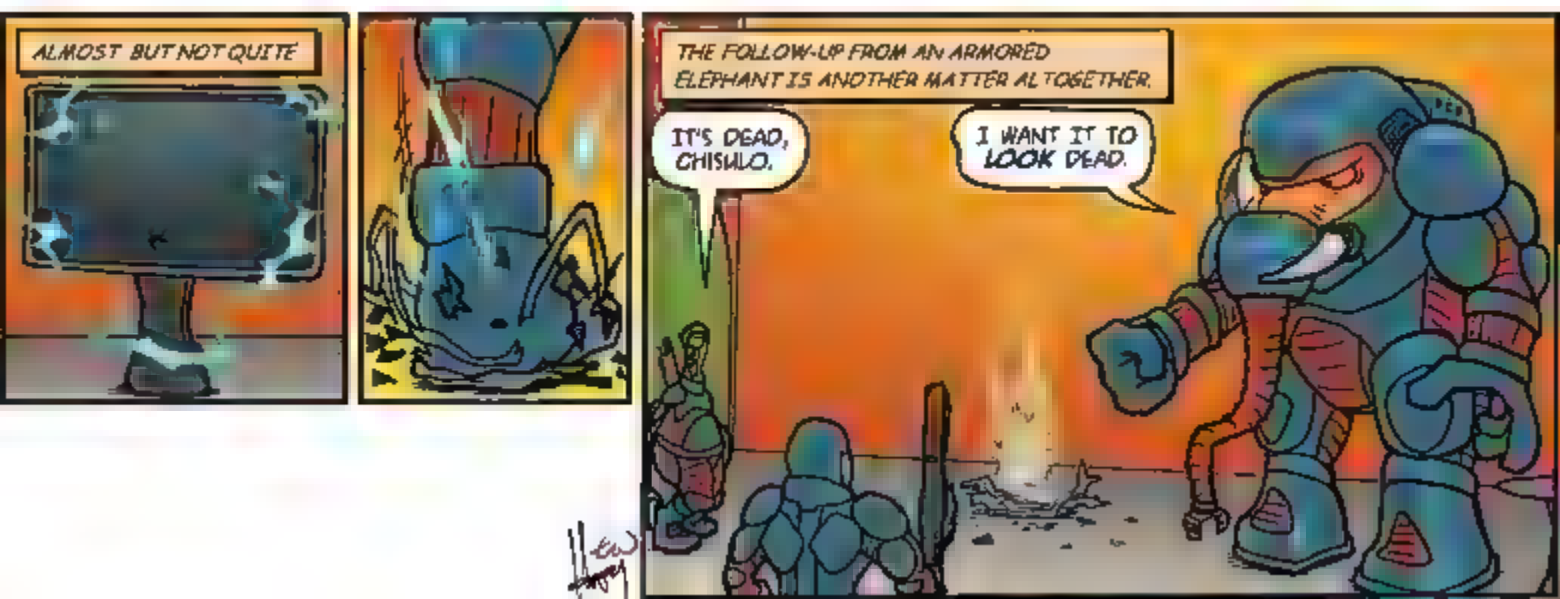

WHY NOT JUST USE BULLETS? IN PRACTICE SHOOTING A DEVICE WITH A BULLET MAY NOT TRULY KILL THAT DEVICE

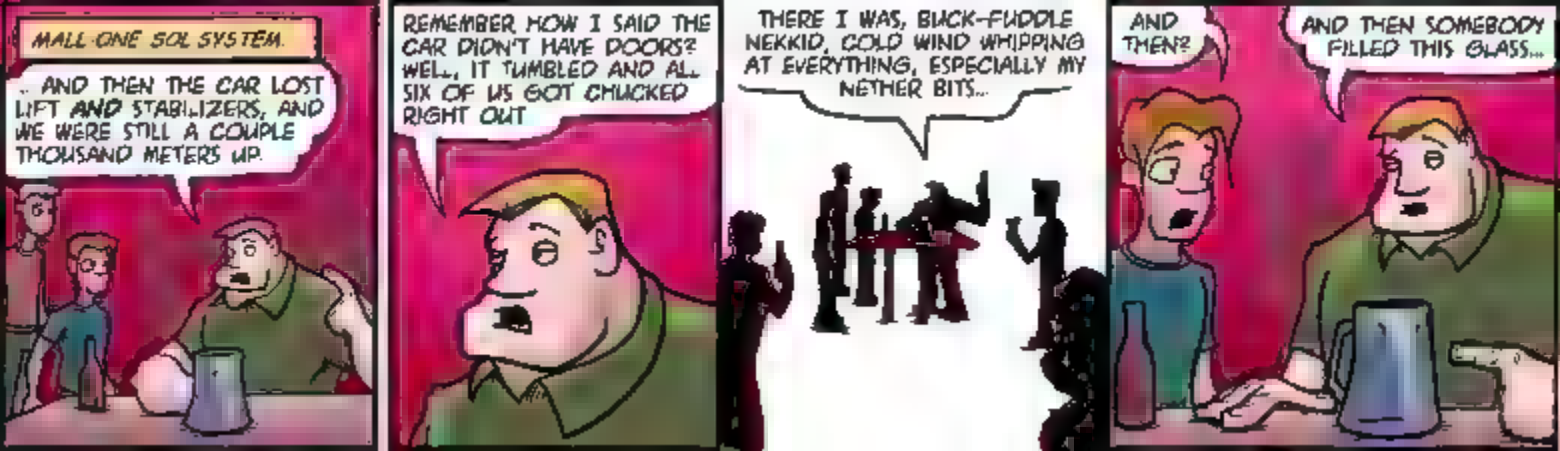


THE DD-101 PULSER FIRES ROUNDS THAT RELEASE A THICK, HOT HAIL OF ENERGETIC PARTICLES ANTI-PARTICLES, AND SHRAPNEL, RENDERING TARGET DEVICES COMPLETELY INERT

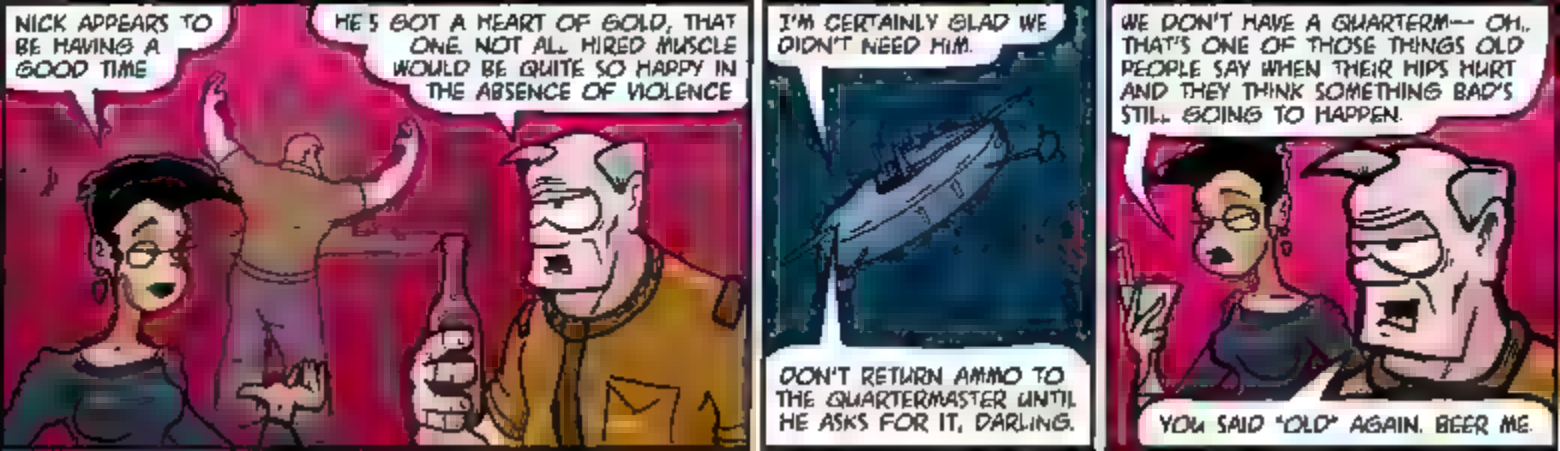



IT IS SO EFFECTIVE IT ALMOST QUALIFIES AS OVERKILL


ALMOST BUT NOT QUITE
THE FOLLOW-UP FROM AN ARMORED ELEPHANT IS ANOTHER MATTER ALTOGETHER.
IT'S DEAD, CHISWLO.
I WANT IT TO LOOK DEAD.


MALL-ONE SOL SYSTEM.
.. AND THEN THE CAR LOST LIFT AND STABILIZERS, AND WE WERE STILL A COUPLE THOUSAND METERS UP.
REMEMBER HOW I SAID THE CAR DIDN'T HAVE DOORS? WELL, IT TUMBLED AND ALL SIX OF US GOT CHUCKED RIGHT OUT
THERE I WAS, BUCK-FUDDLE NEKKID, COLD WIND WHIPPING AT EVERYTHING, ESPECIALLY MY NETHER BITS...
AND THEN?
AND THEN SOMEBODY FILLED THIS GLASS...

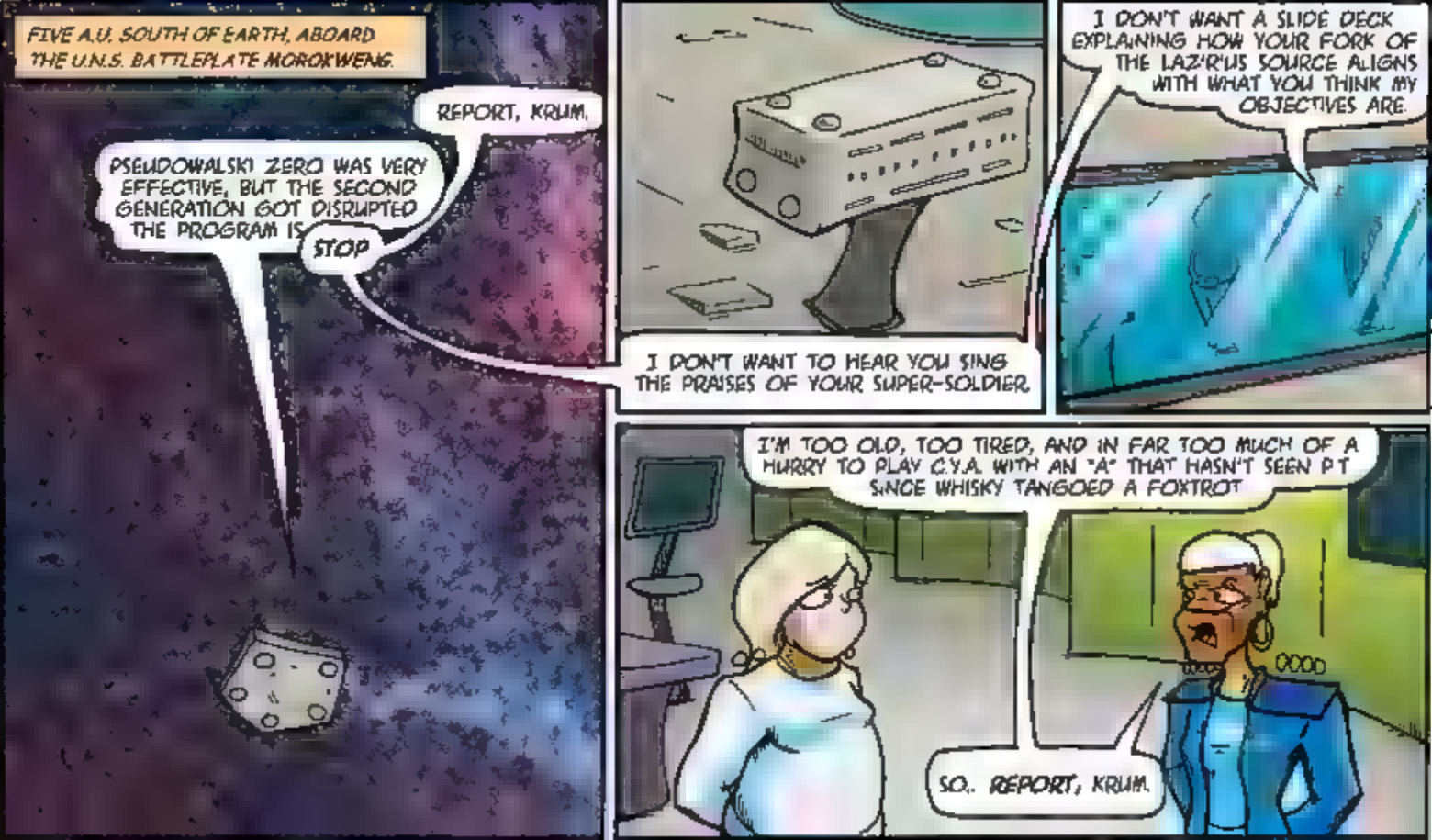

WELL PLAYED, SIR. HERE'S A REFILL.
THANKS, BUT DON'T CALL ME SIR. I WORK FOR A LIVING.
OR... I USED TO, ANYWAY. HMPH.
SORRY, WHERE WAS I?
BUCK NAKED, FALLING, WITH THE WIND WHIPPING YOUR NETHER BITS.
GEEZ, SOMETIMES I WONDER WHY IT TOOK ME SO LONG TO QUIT


NICK APPEARS TO BE HAVING A GOOD TIME
HE'S GOT A HEART OF GOLD, THAT ONE. NOT ALL HIRED MUSCLE WOULD BE QUITE SO HAPPY IN THE ABSENCE OF VIOLENCE
I'M CERTAINLY GLAD WE DIDN'T NEED HIM.
DON'T RETURN AMMO TO THE QUARTERMASTER UNTIL HE ASKS FOR IT, DARLING.
WE DON'T HAVE A QUARTERM— OH, THAT'S ONE OF THOSE THINGS OLD PEOPLE SAY WHEN THEIR HIPS HURT AND THEY THINK SOMETHING BAD'S STILL GOING TO HAPPEN.
YOU SAID "OLD" AGAIN. BEER ME.


SORRY FOR THE "OLD" CRACK. HERE'S THE BEER I OWE YOU. NOW, WHAT'S GOT YOU WORRIED?
JUST A... FEELING, BUT IT'S NOTHING I CAN PIN DOWN.
NOBODY CAME AFTER YOUR FRIENDS, NOBODY'S COME AFTER YOU, AND BRISTLECONE'S LIBERATED STATE IS BEING RESPECTED EVERYWHERE.
I'VE BEEN AROUND TOO LONG TO RELAX WHEN EVERYTHING'S GOING RIGHT
AND IF I SAY ANYTHING I'LL JUST END UP OWING YOU ANOTHER BEER.

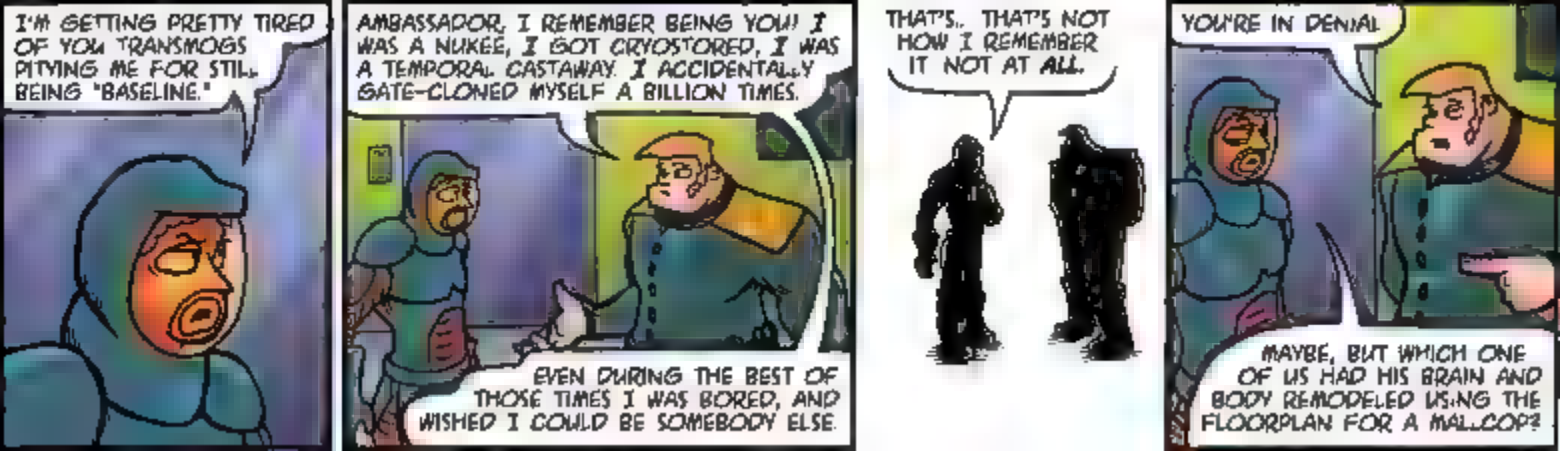

YOU STILL OWE ME A STORY, GENERAL.
HMPH. OKAY. I SUPPOSE THE BEER AND THE APOLOGY WILL COVER A QUICK ANECDOTE.
"A QUICK ANECDOTE" IS NOT THE STORY YOU OWE ME.
THIS ISN'T THE TIME OR PLACE FOR THAT STORY.
HOW ABOUT EVERY TIME YOU REFUSE TO TELL IT, YOU OWE ME A DRINK?
ONLY IF YOU CAN PROVE THAT YOUR BLOOD NANNIES CAN PREVENT YOU FROM BECOMING AN ALCOHOLIC.


QISRI DIG BASE, MEDICAL WING QUARANTINE TWO
I want you to spit out the armor capsule, expand it, and don it as quickly as you can.
Be careful not to engage the lock-down until you're all the way inside.
Okay, you did things in exactly the wrong order.

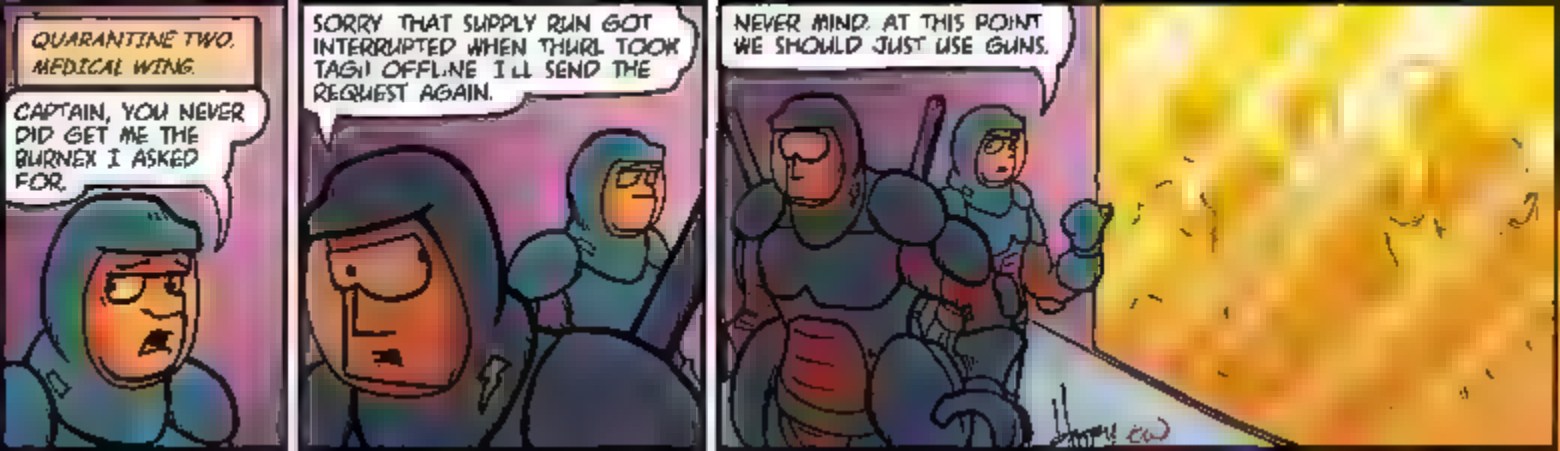

FIVE A.U. SOUTH OF EARTH, ABOARD THE U.N.S. BATTLEPLATE MOROKWENG.
REPORT, KRUM.
PSEUDOWALSKI ZERO WAS VERY EFFECTIVE, BUT THE SECOND GENERATION GOT DISRUPTED THE PROGRAM IS
STOP
I DON'T WANT TO HEAR YOU SING THE PRAISES OF YOUR SUPER-SOLDIER.
I DON'T WANT A SLIDE DECK EXPLAINING HOW YOUR FORK OF THE LAZ'R'US SOURCE ALIGNS WITH WHAT YOU THINK MY OBJECTIVES ARE.
I'M TOO OLD, TOO TIRED, AND IN FAR TOO MUCH OF A HURRY TO PLAY C.Y.A. WITH AN "A" THAT HASN'T SEEN P.T SINCE WHISKY TANGOED A FOXTROT
SO.. REPORT, KRUM.

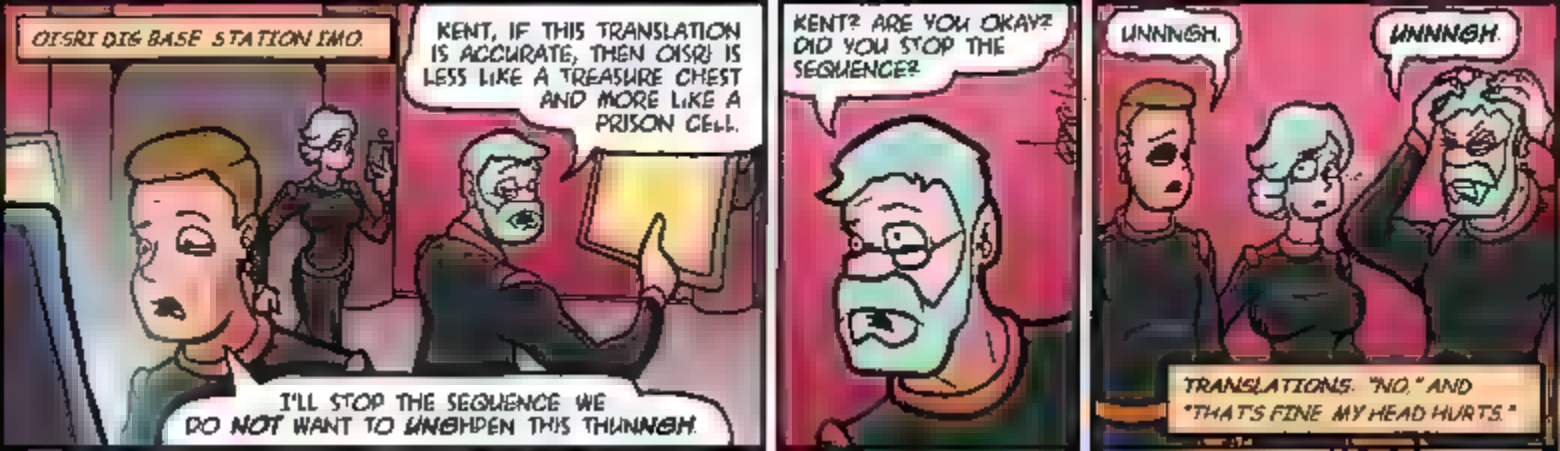

THE GAVS HAVE STARTED COMMUNICATING WITH THE ARTIFACT, AND THE TOUGHS HAVE BEGUN SHOOTING OUT THE ENTERTAINMENT MODULES.
PULL THE PSEUDOWALSKI TRIGGER NOW, BEFORE WE LOSE THE TRIGGER ENTIRELY.
THANK YOU FOR THE VOTE OF CONFIDENCE, ADMIRAL.
I'M NOT EXPRESSING CONFIDENCE. I'M GIVING YOU MORE ROPE IN THE EXPECTATION THAT YOU'LL HANG YOURSELF

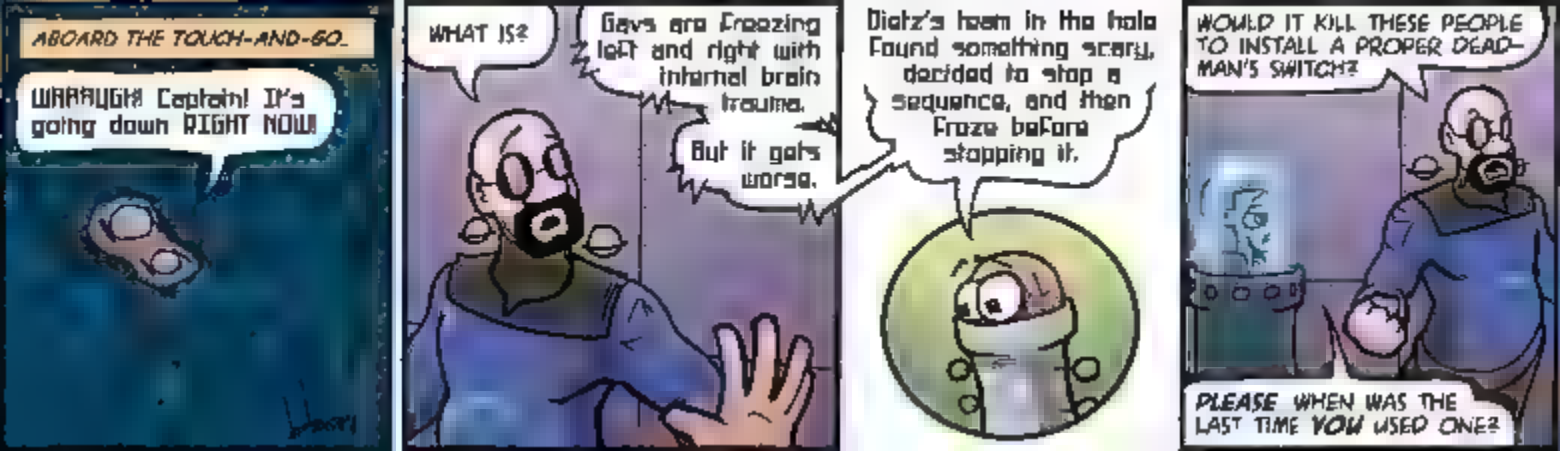

OISRI DIG BASE ADMIN WING.
I UNDERSTAND THE DANGERS, AMBASSADOR. THOSE DANGERS ARE WHY WE HIRED TAGON'S TOUGHS IN THE FIRST PLACE.
I DON'T THINK YOU KNOW WHAT I'M TRYING
PLEASE! I USED TO BE YOU.
I KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO SAY
OKAY THAT THING YOU JUST DID? KIND OF RUDE.
SO IS WEARING FULL POWER ARMOR TO A CONTRACT NEGOTIATION.

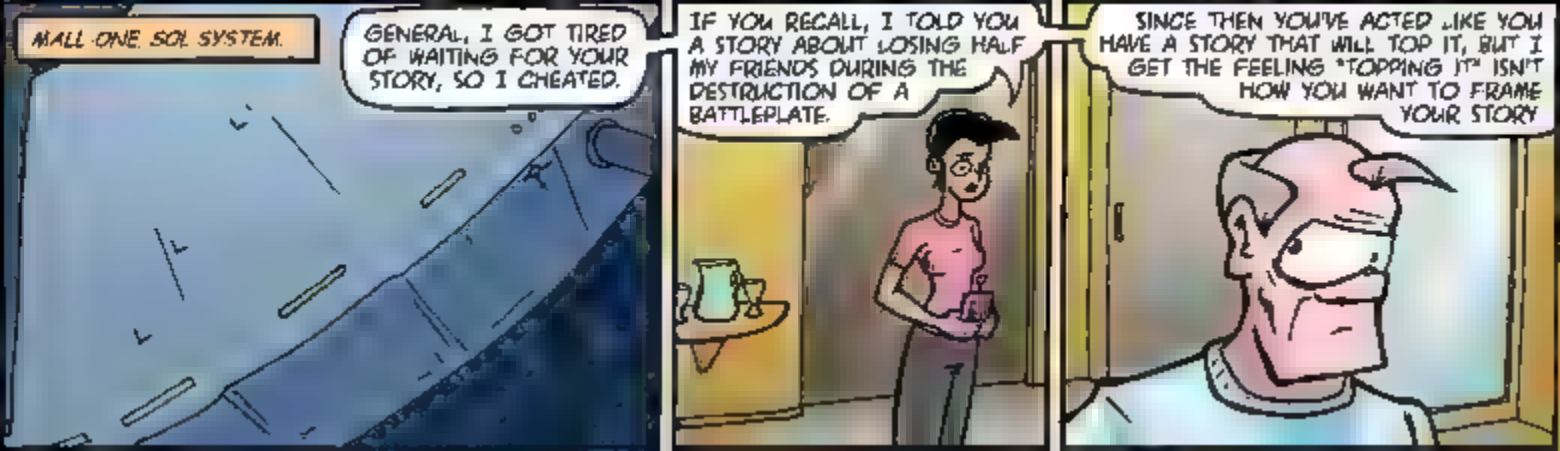

I'M GETTING PRETTY TIRED OF YOU TRANSMOGS PITYING ME FOR STILL BEING "BASELINE."
AMBASSADOR, I REMEMBER BEING YOU! I WAS A NUKEE, I GOT CRYOSTORED, I WAS A TEMPORAL CASTAWAY. I ACCIDENTALLY GATE-CLONED MYSELF A BILLION TIMES.
EVEN DURING THE BEST OF THOSE TIMES I WAS BORED, AND WISHED I COULD BE SOMEBODY ELSE.
THAT'S.. THAT'S NOT HOW I REMEMBER IT NOT AT ALL.
YOU'RE IN DENIAL
MAYBE, BUT WHICH ONE OF US HAD HIS BRAIN AND BODY REMODELED USING THE FLOORPLAN FOR A MALLCOP?


HAH! I GET IT NOW DIVERSITY ENGINEERING NOT ONLY GAVE YOU NEW "SELVES," THEY TWEAKED YOUR BRAINS SO YOU'D *LIKE* BEING THOSE NEW SELVES.
OF COURSE IF THE SELF YOU LIKE ALSO LIKES BEING *ALIVE* WE CAN'T WASTE ANY *MORE* TIME NAVEL-GAZING.
UNGH. STOP TALKING.
YOUR VOICE IS GIVING ME A HEADACHE.
CORRELATION IS NOT CAUSALITY UNLESS MY VOICE IS WHAT'S MAKING STUFF POUR OUT OF YOUR EARS.

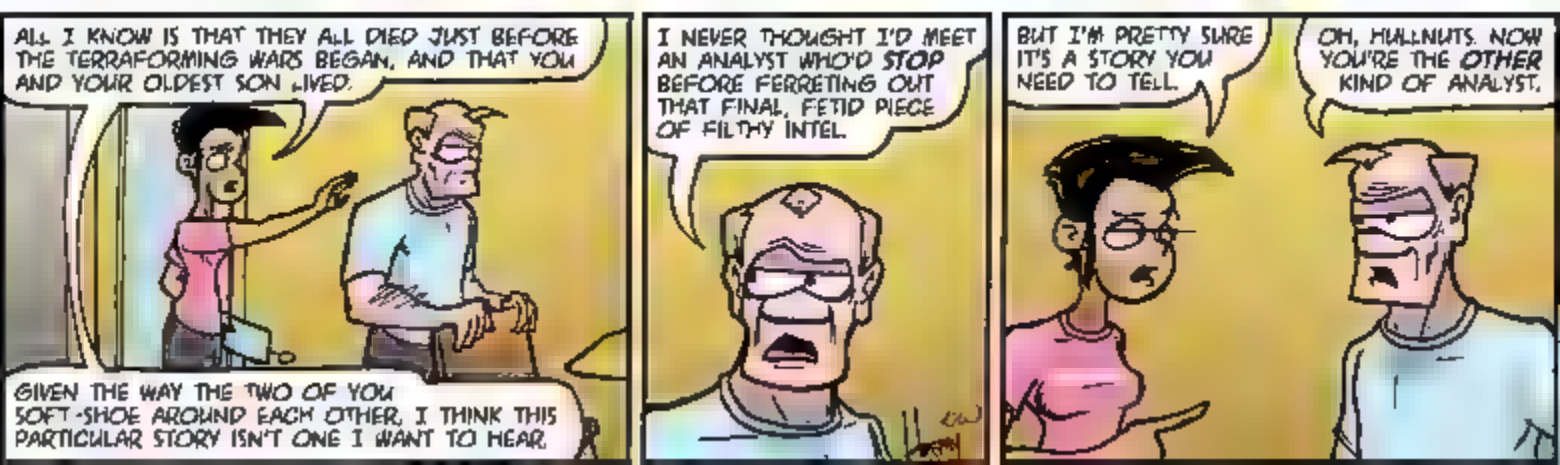

QUARANTINE TWO. MEDICAL WING.
CAPTAIN, YOU NEVER DID GET ME THE BURNEX I ASKED FOR.
SORRY THAT SUPPLY RUN GOT INTERRUPTED WHEN THURL TOOK TAG! OFFLINE I'LL SEND THE REQUEST AGAIN.
NEVER MIND. AT THIS POINT WE SHOULD JUST USE GUNS.

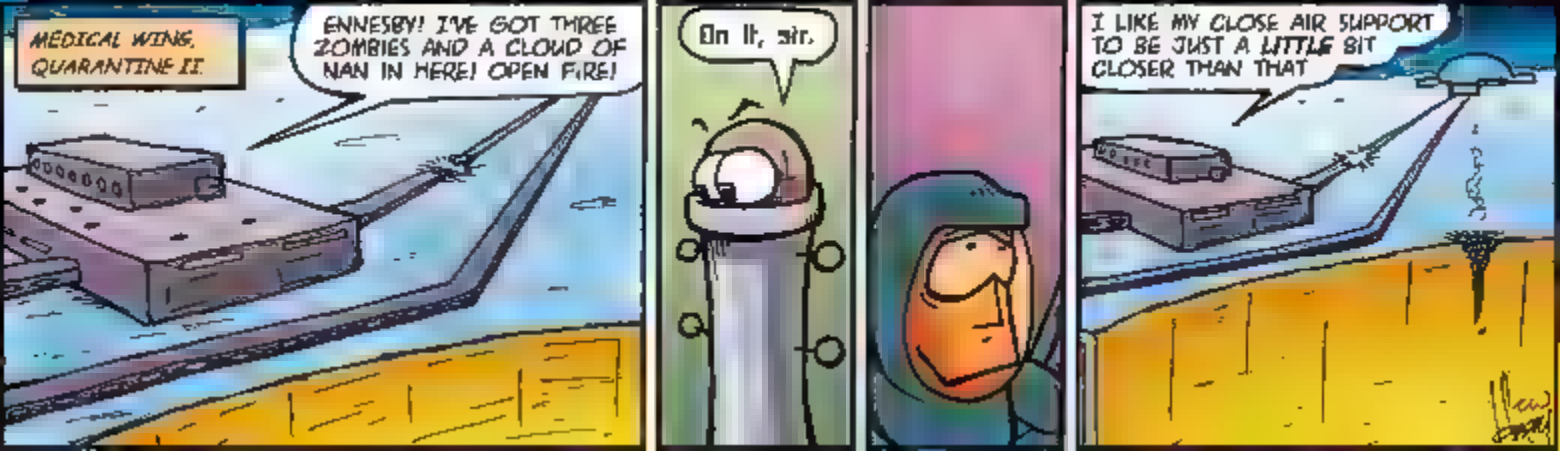

OISRI DIG BASE STATION IMO.
KENT, IF THIS TRANSLATION IS ACCURATE, THEN OISRI IS LESS LIKE A TREASURE CHEST AND MORE LIKE A PRISON CELL.
I'LL STOP THE SEQUENCE. WE DO NOT WANT TO UNLEASH THIS THUNNGH.
KENT? ARE YOU OKAY? DID YOU STOP THE SEQUENCE?
UNNNGH.
UNNNGH.
TRANSLATIONS: "NO," AND "THAT'S FINE. MY HEAD HURTS."

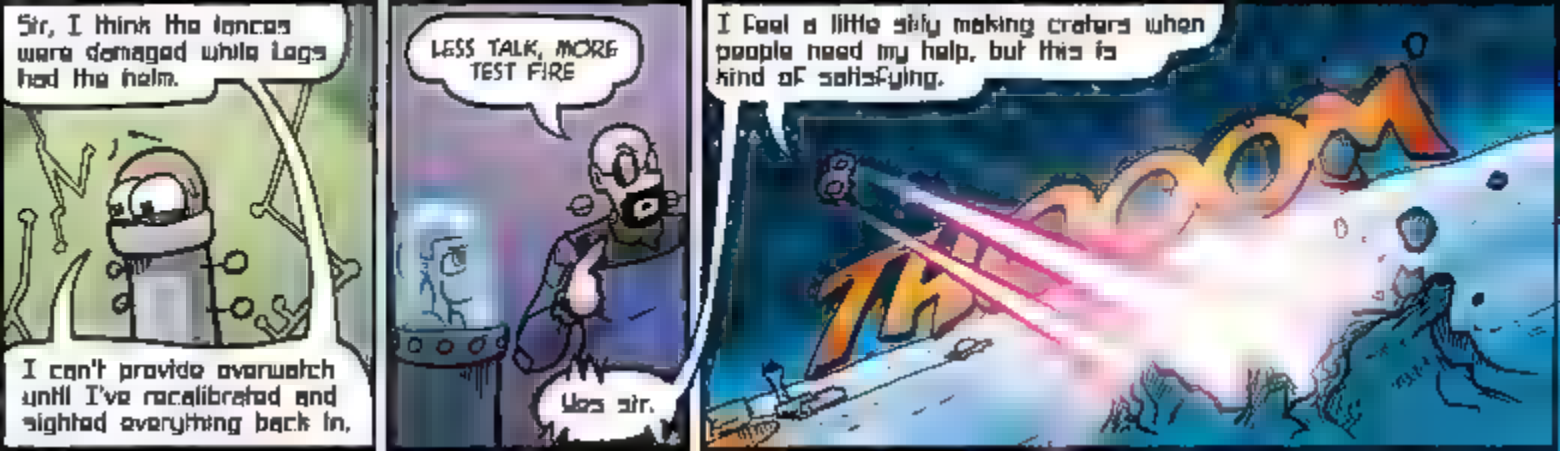

ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO_
WRRRUGH! Captain! It's going down RIGHT NOW!
WHAT IS?
Guys are freezing left and right with internal brain trauma.
But it gets worse.
Dietz's team in the hole found something scary, decided to stop a sequence, and then froze before stopping it.
WOULD IT KILL THESE PEOPLE TO INSTALL A PROPER DEAD-MAN'S SWITCH?
PLEASE WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU USED ONE?

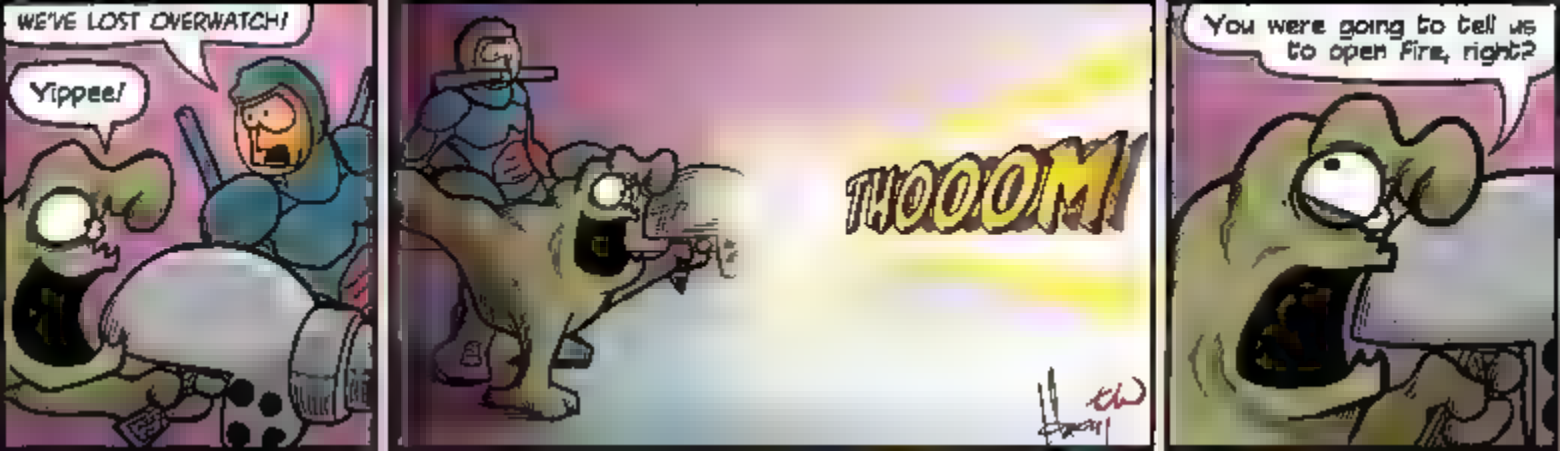

MALL ONE SOL SYSTEM.
GENERAL, I GOT TIRED OF WAITING FOR YOUR STORY, SO I CHEATED.
IF YOU RECALL, I TOLD YOU A STORY ABOUT LOSING HALF MY FRIENDS DURING THE DESTRUCTION OF A BATTLEPLATE.
SINCE THEN YOU'VE ACTED LIKE YOU HAVE A STORY THAT WILL TOP IT, BUT I GET THE FEELING "TOPPING IT" ISN'T HOW YOU WANT TO FRAME YOUR STORY


FROM THAT I DEDUCED THAT YOU LOST CLOSE FRIENDS OR FAMILY, AND THE STORY IS SO PERSONAL YOU'RE RELUCTANT TO TELL IT DURING A TYPICAL TALE SWAP IN THE BAR.
I BEGAN BY RESEARCHING YOUR IMMEDIATE FAMILY, AND AS I'M SURE YOU'D EXPECT, I IMMEDIATELY RAN UP AGAINST A WALL.
THE WALL WAS MADE OF LOCKED RECORDS. WITHOUT CLEARANCE, I CANNOT DETERMINE HOW YOUR WIFE, YOUR PARENTS, OR YOUR TWO YOUNGEST CHILDREN DIED

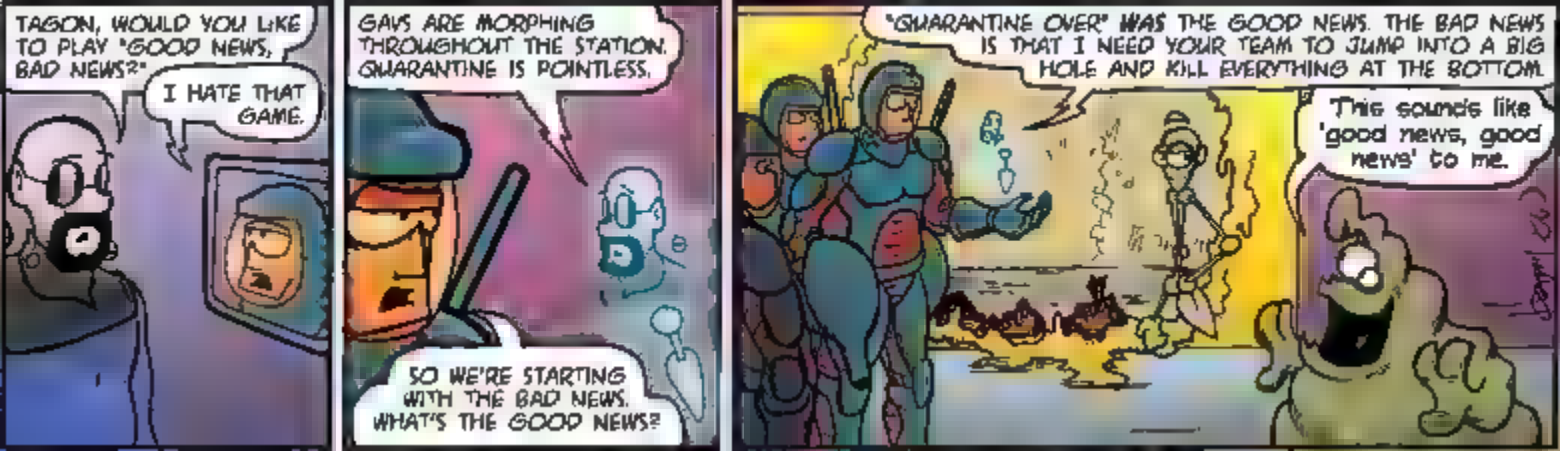

ALL I KNOW IS THAT THEY ALL DIED JUST BEFORE THE TERRAFORMING WARS BEGAN, AND THAT YOU AND YOUR OLDEST SON LIVED.
GIVEN THE WAY THE TWO OF YOU SOFT-SHOE AROUND EACH OTHER, I THINK THIS PARTICULAR STORY ISN'T ONE I WANT TO HEAR.
I NEVER THOUGHT I'D MEET AN ANALYST WHO'D STOP BEFORE FERRETING OUT THAT FINAL, FETID PIECE OF FILTHY INTEL.
BUT I'M PRETTY SURE IT'S A STORY YOU NEED TO TELL.
OH, HULLNUTS. NOW YOU'RE THE OTHER KIND OF ANALYST.


MEDICAL WING, QUARANTINE II.
ENNESBY! I'VE GOT THREE ZOMBIES AND A CLOUD OF NAN IN HERE! OPEN FIRE!
On it, sir.
I LIKE MY CLOSE AIR SUPPORT TO BE JUST A LITTLE BIT CLOSER THAN THAT


Sir, I think the lances were damaged while Lags had the helm.
I can't provide overwatch until I've recalibrated and sighted everything back in.
LESS TALK, MORE TEST FIRE
Yes sir.
I feel a little silly making craters when people need my help, but this is kind of satisfying.
KOOM
TH


WE'VE LOST OVERWATCH!
Yippee!
THOOOM!
You were going to tell us to open fire, right?

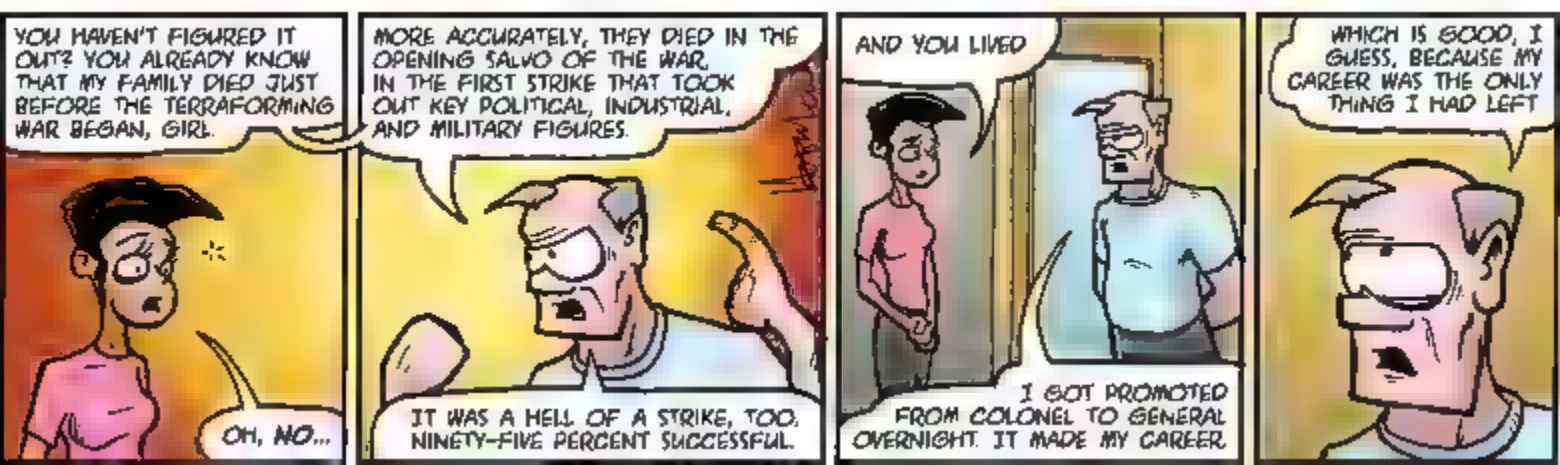

STATION IMO.. ENNESBY, WE NEED TO STOP THAT SEQUENCE, RIGHT?
Right. The lances aren't calibrating, though. There's a software problem.
CAN'T YOU HIT IMO WITH A MISSILE?
I can, but it now looks like I should save my missiles for other things.
WHAT SORT OF OTHER THINGS?
Fast, armored, bristling-with-weapons things that shoot message beacons.

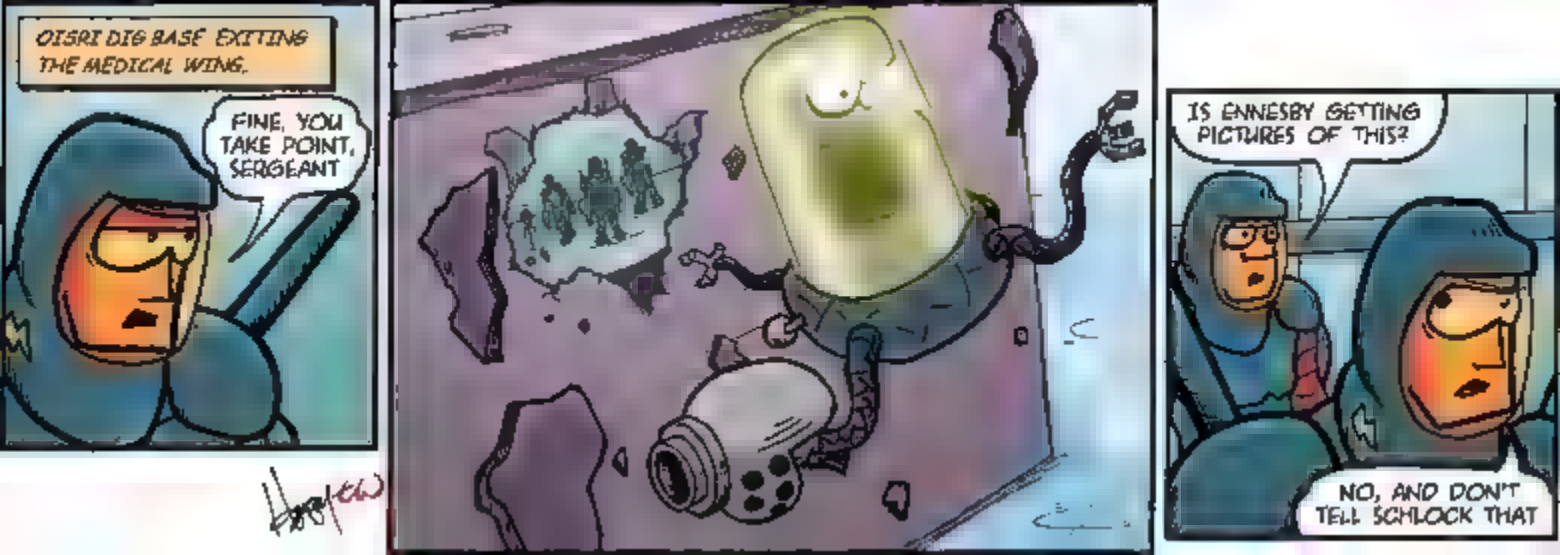

TAGON, WOULD YOU LIKE TO PLAY "GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS?"
I HATE THAT GAME.
GAVS ARE MORPHING THROUGHOUT THE STATION. QUARANTINE IS POINTLESS.
SO WE'RE STARTING WITH THE BAD NEWS. WHAT'S THE GOOD NEWS?
"QUARANTINE OVER" WAS THE GOOD NEWS. THE BAD NEWS IS THAT I NEED YOUR TEAM TO JUMP INTO A BIG HOLE AND KILL EVERYTHING AT THE BOTTOM.
This sounds like 'good news, good news' to me.

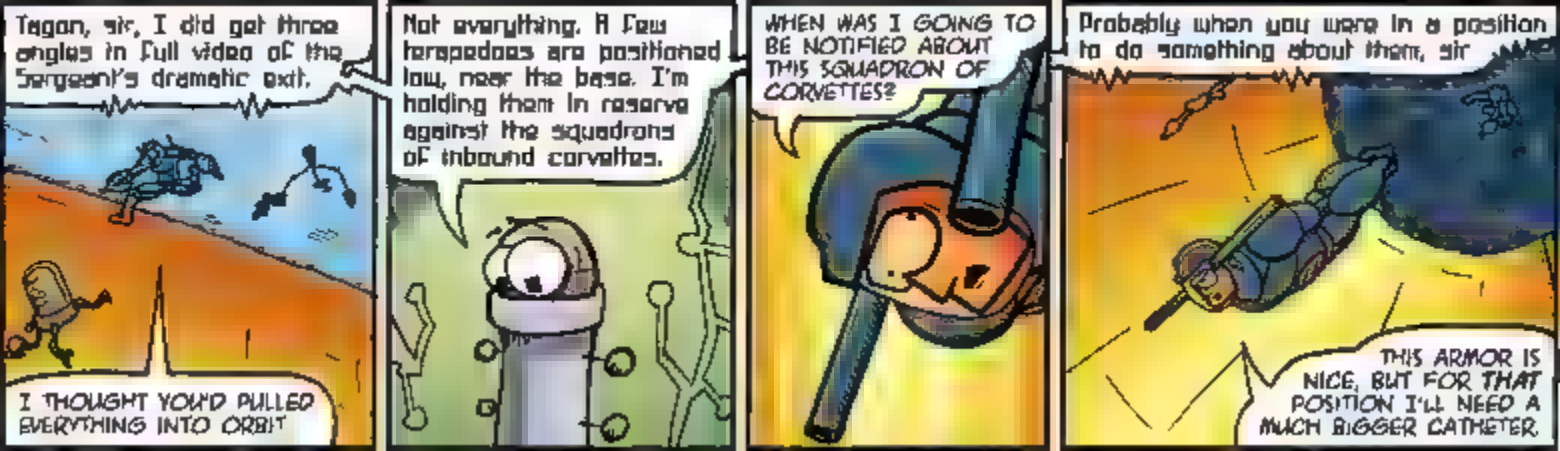

SERGEANT, YOU CAN'T JUMP DOWN THERE YOU DON'T HA
BLOCK
OH. OKAY BUT WHAT ABOUT
FLIGHT RIGHT I'M NOT GOING TO ASK ABOUT WEAPONS.
Oooh, I need to remember to spit those out before I get in.

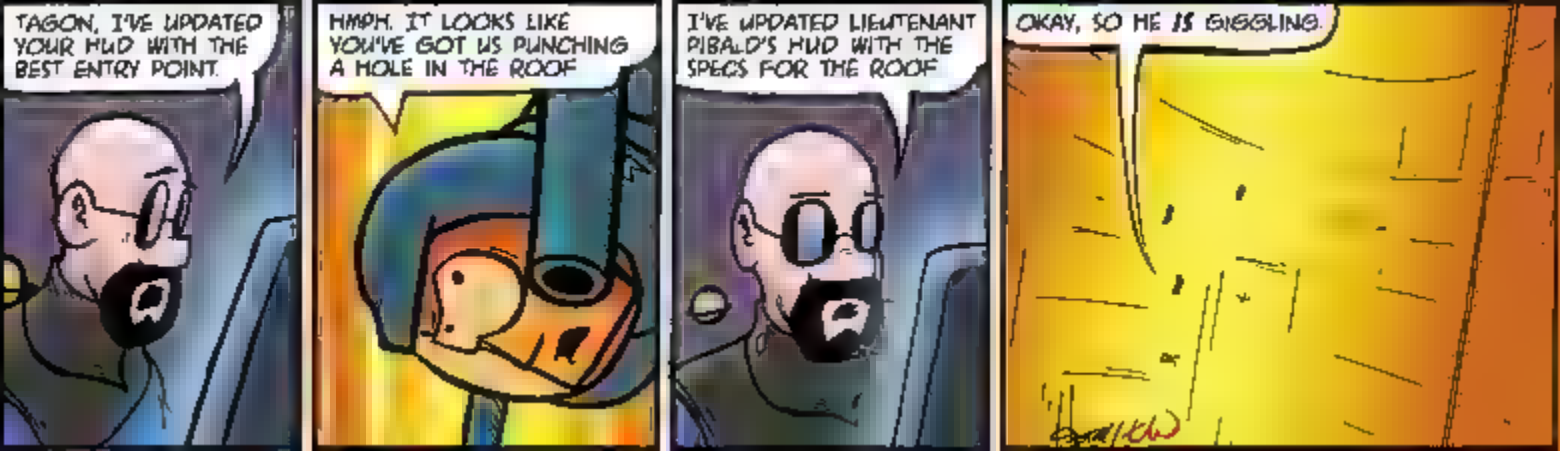

MALL-ONE SOL SYSTEM.
OKAY, STORY TIME. I'LL TRY TO MAKE THIS QUICK.
I'M NOT IN A HURRY, GENERAL.
THIS ISN'T ABOUT YOU.
MOUTHFUL
OKAY, THEN.


WE WERE HAVING A FAMILY PARTY, AND KAFF BROUGHT A GIRL.
SHE WAS A CUTE KID. SMART, TOO. I CAN SEE WHAT THE BOY SAW IN HER.
IRONIC, I GUESS. NOBODY SAW WHAT WAS ACTUALLY IN HER.
WE NEVER DID FIGURE OUT IF SHE WAS COMPLICIT IN THE PLOT, WHETHER SHE WAS A KNIGHT, OR JUST SOMEBODY ELSE'S PAWN.
WHAT PLOT?

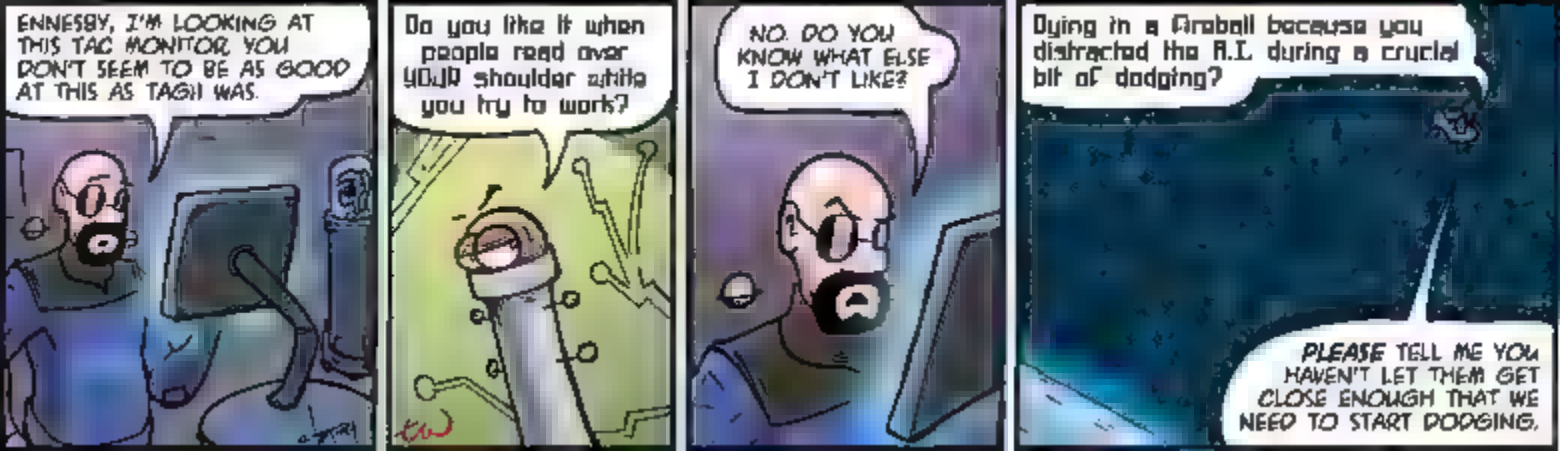

YOU HAVEN'T FIGURED IT OUT? YOU ALREADY KNOW THAT MY FAMILY DIED JUST BEFORE THE TERRAFORMING WAR BEGAN, GIRL.
OH, NO...
MORE ACCURATELY, THEY DIED IN THE OPENING SALVO OF THE WAR, IN THE FIRST STRIKE THAT TOOK OUT KEY POLITICAL, INDUSTRIAL, AND MILITARY FIGURES.
IT WAS A HELL OF A STRIKE, TOO. NINETY-FIVE PERCENT SUCCESSFUL.
AND YOU LIVED
I GOT PROMOTED FROM COLONEL TO GENERAL OVERNIGHT. IT MADE MY CAREER
WHICH IS GOOD, I GUESS, BECAUSE MY CAREER WAS THE ONLY THING I HAD LEFT

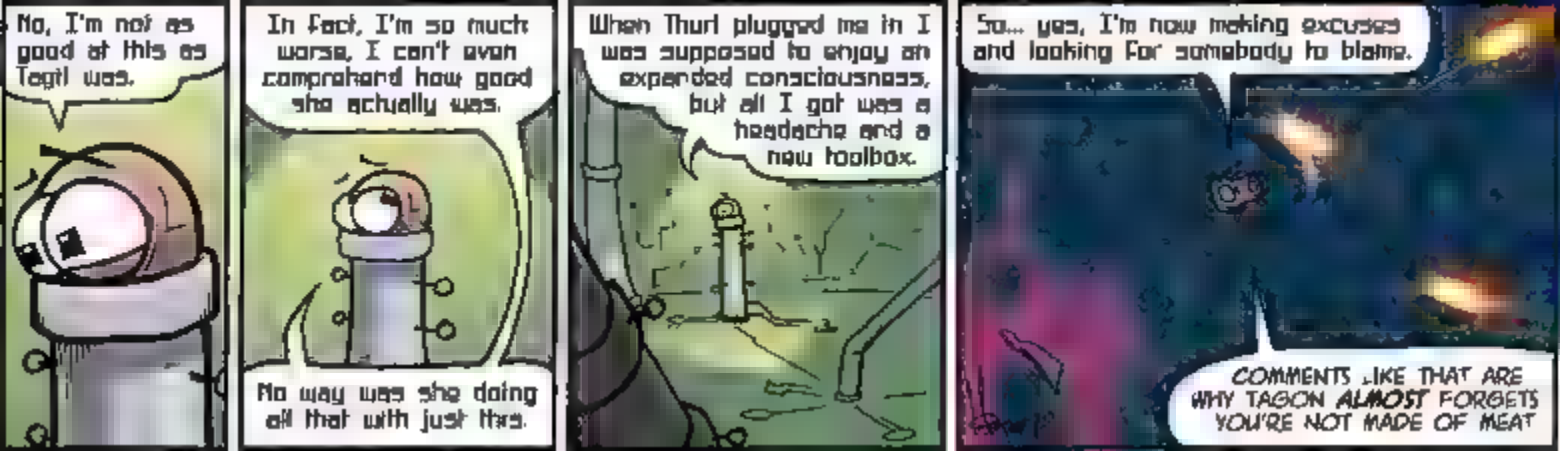

OISRI DIG BASE EXITING THE MEDICAL WING.
FINE. YOU TAKE POINT, SERGEANT
IS ENNESBY GETTING PICTURES OF THIS?
NO, AND DON'T TELL SCHLOCK THAT


Tagan, sir, I did get three angles in full video of the Sergeant's dramatic exit.
I THOUGHT YOU'D PULLED EVERYTHING INTO ORBIT
Not everything. A few torpedoes are positioned low, near the base. I'm holding them in reserve against the squadrons of inbound corvettes.
WHEN WAS I GOING TO BE NOTIFIED ABOUT THIS SQUADRON OF CORVETTES?
Probably when you were in a position to do something about them, sir
THIS ARMOR IS NICE, BUT FOR THAT POSITION I'LL NEED A MUCH BIGGER CATHETER.


TAGON, I'VE UPDATED YOUR HUD WITH THE BEST ENTRY POINT.
HMPH. IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'VE GOT US PUNCHING A HOLE IN THE ROOF
I'VE UPDATED LIEUTENANT PIBALD'S HUD WITH THE SPECS FOR THE ROOF
OKAY, SO HE IS GIGGLING.


ENNESBY! HOW'S THAT DEFENSIVE ACTION GOING?
Noisy and bright.
Missiles, chaff, lance bombs, submunitions...
It's like a light-show with fireworks and confetti. I can almost pretend it's a party.
IT'S NOT A PARTY UNTIL SOMETHING GETS BROKEN.
Oh, don't worry. I'm breaking things.

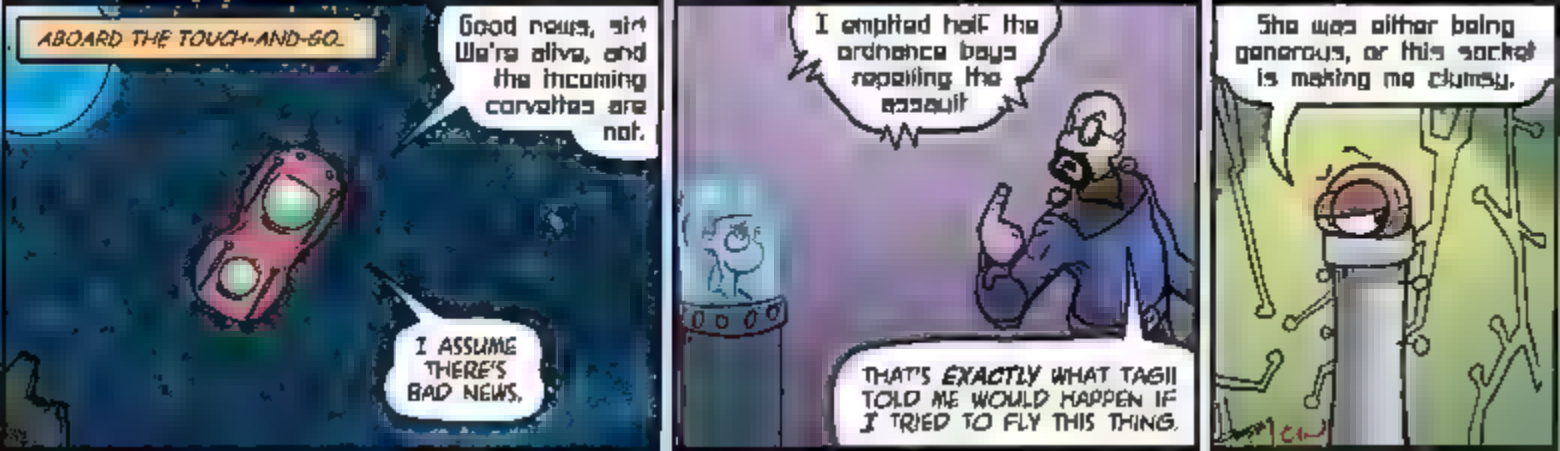

ENNESBY, I'M LOOKING AT THIS TAC MONITOR. YOU DON'T SEEM TO BE AS GOOD AT THIS AS TAGII WAS.
Do you like it when people read over YOUR shoulder while you try to work?
NO. DO YOU KNOW WHAT ELSE I DON'T LIKE?
Dying in a fireball because you distracted the A.I. during a crucial bit of dodging?
PLEASE TELL ME YOU HAVEN'T LET THEM GET CLOSE ENOUGH THAT WE NEED TO START DODGING.

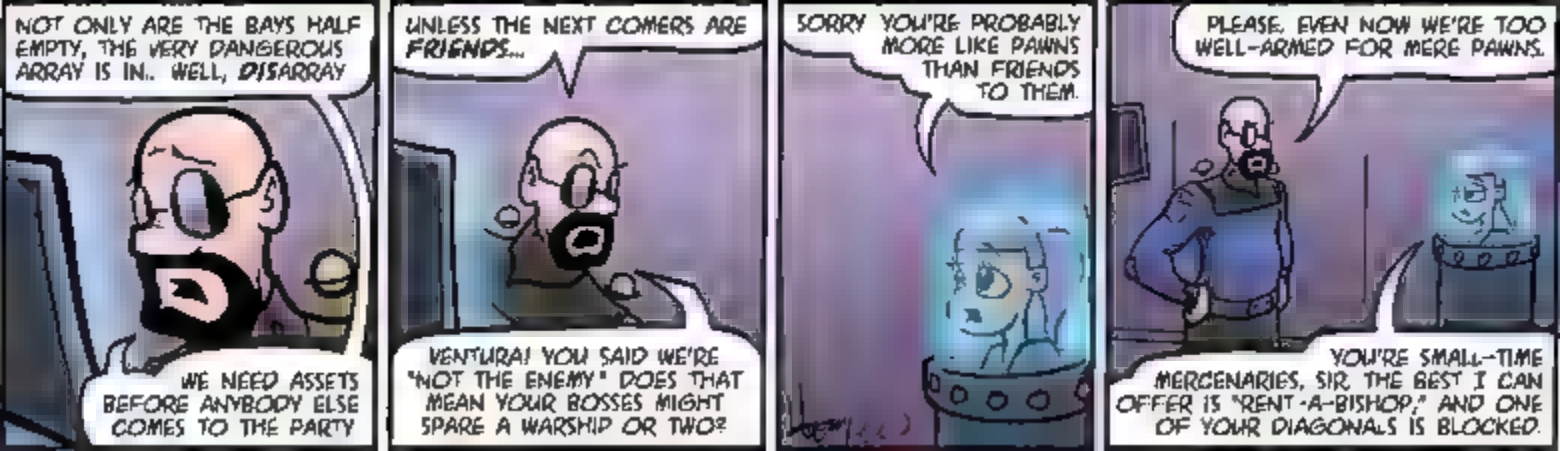

No, I'm not as good at this as Tagit was.
In fact, I'm so much worse, I can't even comprehend how good she actually was.
No way was she doing all that with just this.
When Thurl plugged me in I was supposed to enjoy an expanded consciousness, but all I got was a headache and a new toolbox.
So... yes, I'm now making excuses and looking for somebody to blame.
COMMENTS LIKE THAT ARE WHY TAGON ALMOST FORGETS YOU'RE NOT MADE OF MEAT


MALL ONE, THE GENERAL'S STORY CONTINUES.
PACKING A HUMAN BEING WITH A KILLER SWARM OF WEAPONIZED NANNIES IS CRUEL, WHETHER OR NOT YOUR MULE KNOWS WHAT THEY'RE GETTING INTO.
KAFF'S GIRLFRIEND SHUDDERED, LIKE SHE WAS HAVING A SEIZURE.
HER EYES ROLLED ALL THE WAY BACK, HER MOUTH LOCKED WIDE OPEN, AND SHE WHIMPERED ONCE.
THE FIRST THING I DID WAS DEPLOY MY HELMET
THE FIRST THING MY MIRALI DID WAS RUSH TO THE GIRL'S SIDE.
GODS AND MONSTERS, KIDDO. I DON'T THINK I CAN DO THIS.

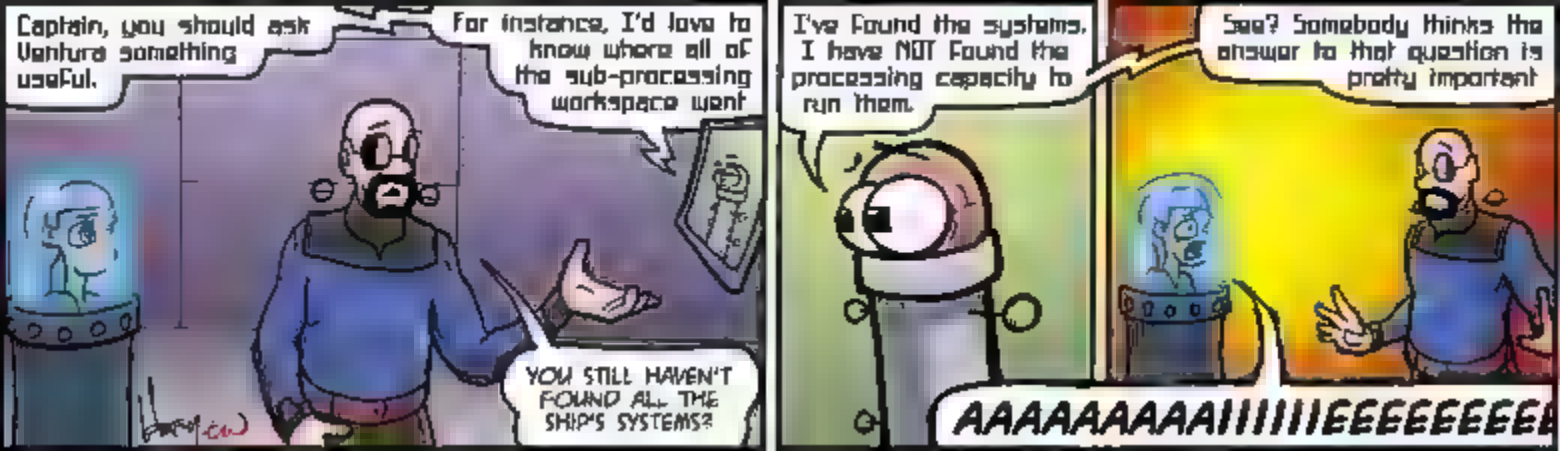

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU TOLD THIS STORY?
THE FIRST AND THE LAST TIME WAS WHEN I WAS DEBRIEFED
SO IT'S BEEN A WHILE.
YOU DIDN'T SAY "OLD" BUT I THINK YOU STILL OWE ME A BEER FOR THAT REMARK.
BEER IS FOR PICNICS AND PISSING MATCHES. I BROUGHT BOURBON.
DID YOU BRING ANY FOR YOU?

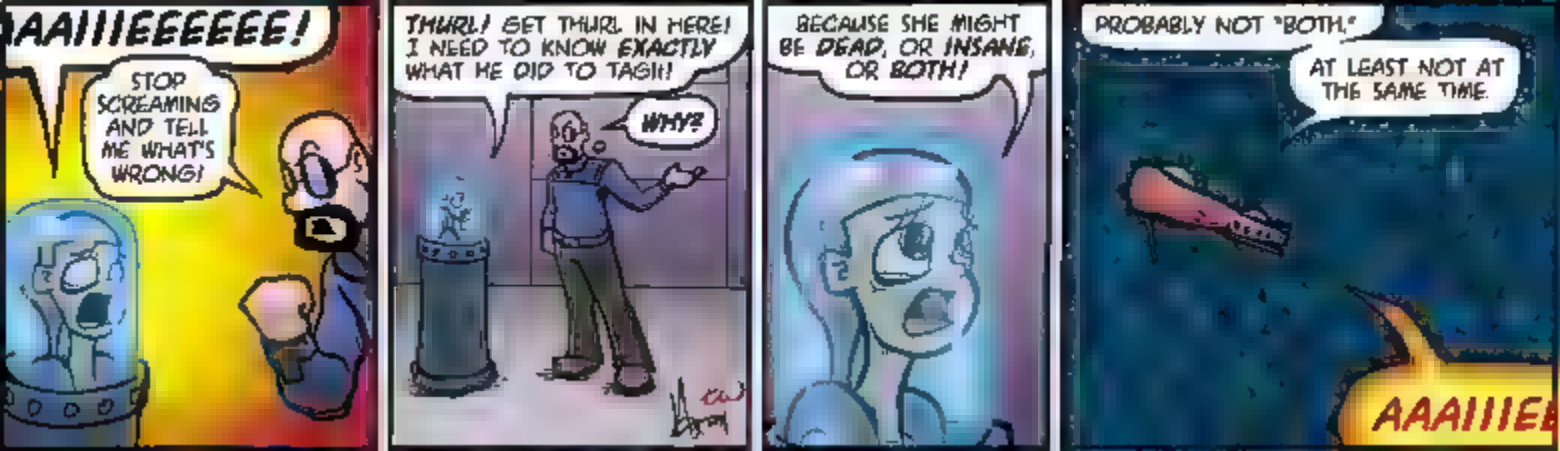

GISRI DIG BASE ADMIN WING.
IS THIS THING ON? I NEED SOME HELP!
THIS IS COMMANDER FOXWORTHY TAKE THE NEXT LEFT AND RUN FOR SECURITY. WE'LL BE EXPECTING YOU.
I SHOW YOU IN A SET OF CIWY ARMOR. HOW'S IT WORKING FOR YOU?
GUS BOUNCED RIGHT OFF ME, I RAN THROUGH A WALL, AND THE CLOUD OF KILLER NANNIES HASN'T EATEN ME YET
WAAAUUUUGH!
OKAY, I JUST GAVE BOTH CATHETERS AN INSTANT-ON STRESS TEST
YUP THERE IT IS ON YOUR TELEMETRY NICE FLOW.

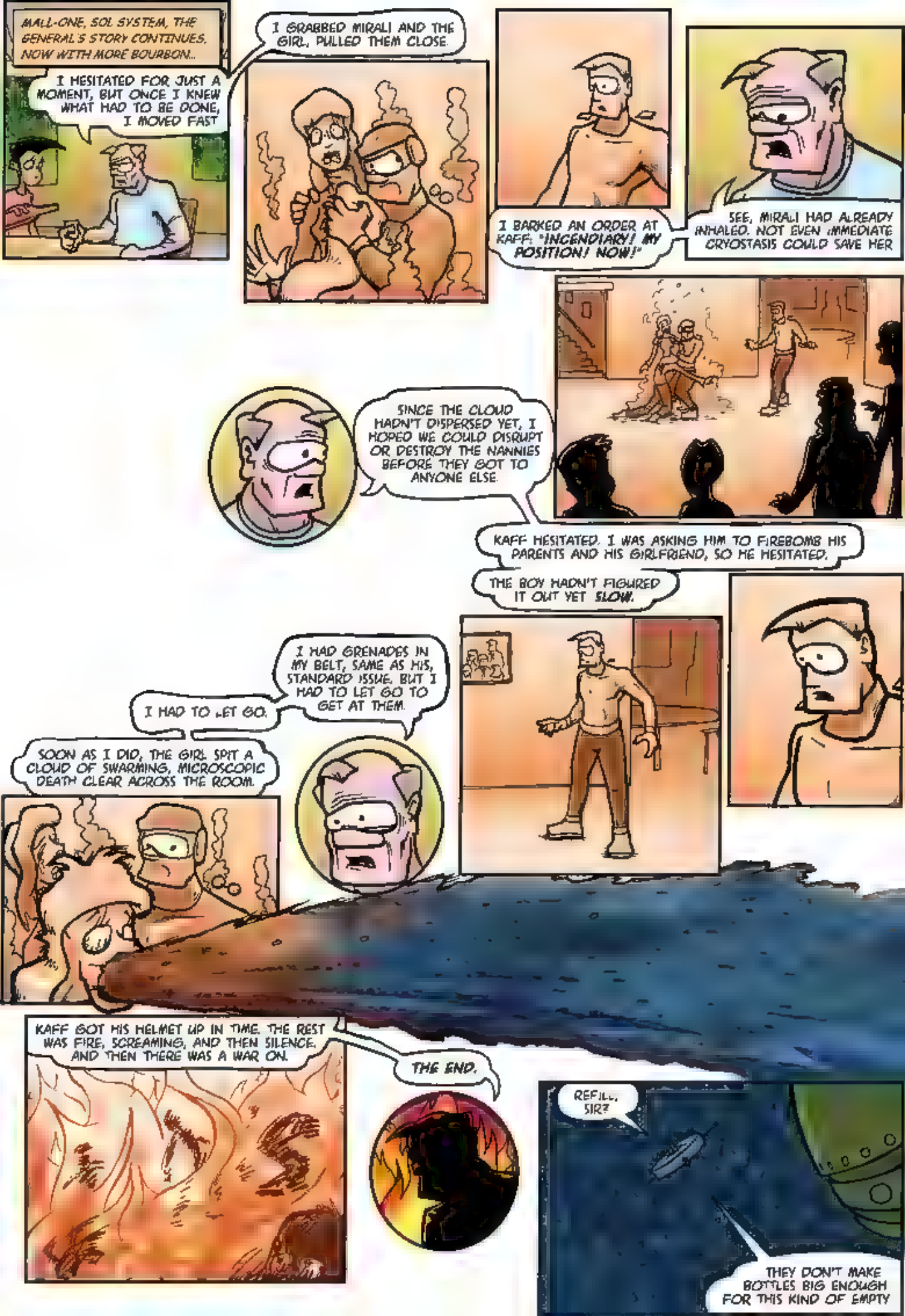

ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO.
Good news, sir! We're alive, and the incoming corvettes are not.
I ASSUME THERE'S BAD NEWS.
I emptied half the ordnance bays repelling the assault
THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT TAGII TOLD ME WOULD HAPPEN IF I TRIED TO FLY THIS THING.
She was either being generous, or this socket is making me clumsy.


NOT ONLY ARE THE BAYS HALF EMPTY, THE VERY DANGEROUS ARRAY IS IN.. WELL, DISARRAY
WE NEED ASSETS BEFORE ANYBODY ELSE COMES TO THE PARTY
UNLESS THE NEXT COMERS ARE FRIENDS...
VENTURA! YOU SAID WE'RE "NOT THE ENEMY" DOES THAT MEAN YOUR BOSSES MIGHT SPARE A WARSHIP OR TWO?
SORRY YOU'RE PROBABLY MORE LIKE PAWNS THAN FRIENDS TO THEM.
PLEASE. EVEN NOW WE'RE TOO WELL-ARMED FOR MERE PAWNS.
YOU'RE SMALL-TIME MERCENARIES, SIR. THE BEST I CAN OFFER IS "RENT-A-BISHOP," AND ONE OF YOUR DIAGONALS IS BLOCKED.

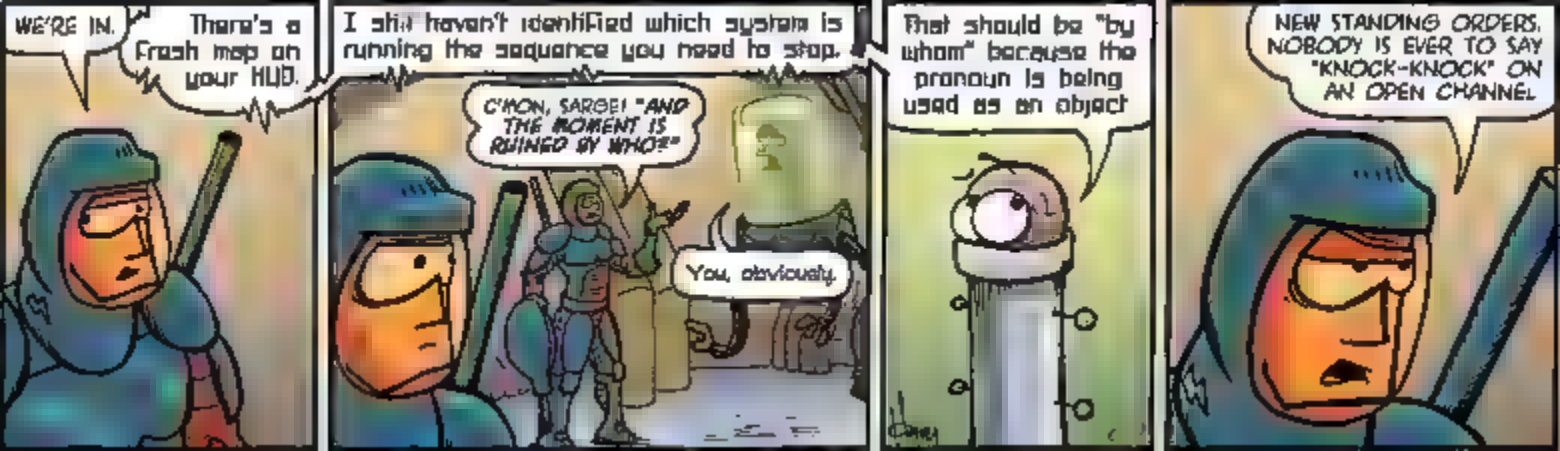

WHAT'S THE END GAME HERE? WHAT ARE YOUR EMPLOYERS AT "INT-AFF-INT" UP TO?
KEVYN, THAT INFORMATION IS WAY ABOVE MY PAY GRADE.
I MEAN, IF THAT INFORMATION WENT SUPERNOVA, MY PAY GRADE WOULDN'T SEE THE LIGHT FOR A WEEK
YOUR PAY GRADE IS ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-TWO BILLION KILOMETERS TOO LOW?
THEY DON'T PAY ME VERY MUCH, BECAUSE THEY ASSUME YOU'LL BE PAYING ME TOO.


Captain, you should ask Ventura something useful.
For instance, I'd love to know where all of the sub-processing workspace went
YOU STILL HAVEN'T FOUND ALL THE SHIP'S SYSTEMS?
I've found the systems. I have NOT found the processing capacity to run them.
See? Somebody thinks the answer to that question is pretty important
AAAAAAAAAIIIIIIEEEEEEEEEE

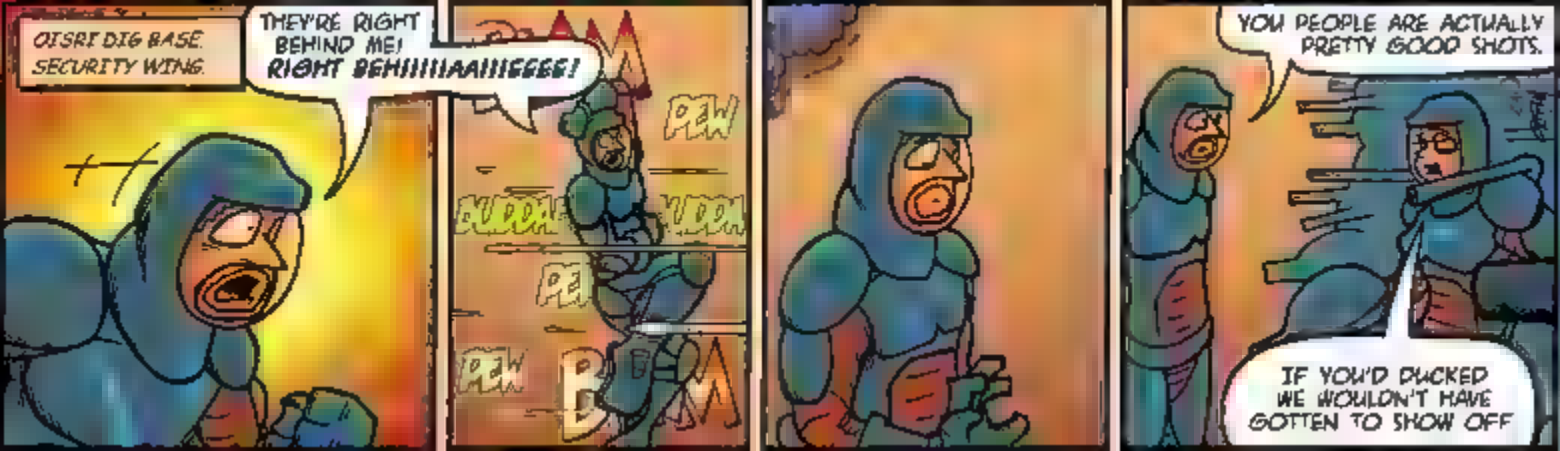

AAIIIEEEEEE!
STOP SCREAMING AND TELL ME WHAT'S WRONG!
THURL! GET THURL IN HERE! I NEED TO KNOW EXACTLY WHAT HE DID TO TAGII!
WHY?
BECAUSE SHE MIGHT BE DEAD, OR INSANE, OR BOTH!
PROBABLY NOT "BOTH."
AT LEAST NOT AT THE SAME TIME
AAAIIIE


MALL-ONE, SOL SYSTEM. THE GENERAL'S STORY CONTINUES. NOW WITH MORE BOURBON...
I HESITATED FOR JUST A MOMENT, BUT ONCE I KNEW WHAT HAD TO BE DONE, I MOVED FAST
I GRABBED MIRALI AND THE GIRL, PULLED THEM CLOSE.
I BARKED AN ORDER AT KAFF: "INCENDIARY! MY POSITION! NOW!"
SEE, MIRALI HAD ALREADY INHALED. NOT EVEN IMMEDIATE CRYOSTASIS COULD SAVE HER
SINCE THE CLOUD HADN'T DISPERSED YET, I HOPED WE COULD DISRUPT OR DESTROY THE NANNIES BEFORE THEY GOT TO ANYONE ELSE.
KAFF HESITATED. I WAS ASKING HIM TO FIREBOMB HIS PARENTS AND HIS GIRLFRIEND, SO HE HESITATED.
THE BOY HADN'T FIGURED IT OUT YET SLOW.
I HAD GRENADES IN MY BELT, SAME AS HIS, STANDARD ISSUE. BUT I HAD TO LET GO TO GET AT THEM.
I HAD TO LET GO.
SOON AS I DID, THE GIRL SPIT A CLOUD OF SWARMING, MICROSCOPIC DEATH CLEAR ACROSS THE ROOM.
KAFF GOT HIS HELMET UP IN TIME. THE REST WAS FIRE, SCREAMING, AND THEN SILENCE. AND THEN THERE WAS A WAR ON.
THE END.
REFILL, SIR?
THEY DON'T MAKE BOTTLES BIG ENOUGH FOR THIS KIND OF EMPTY

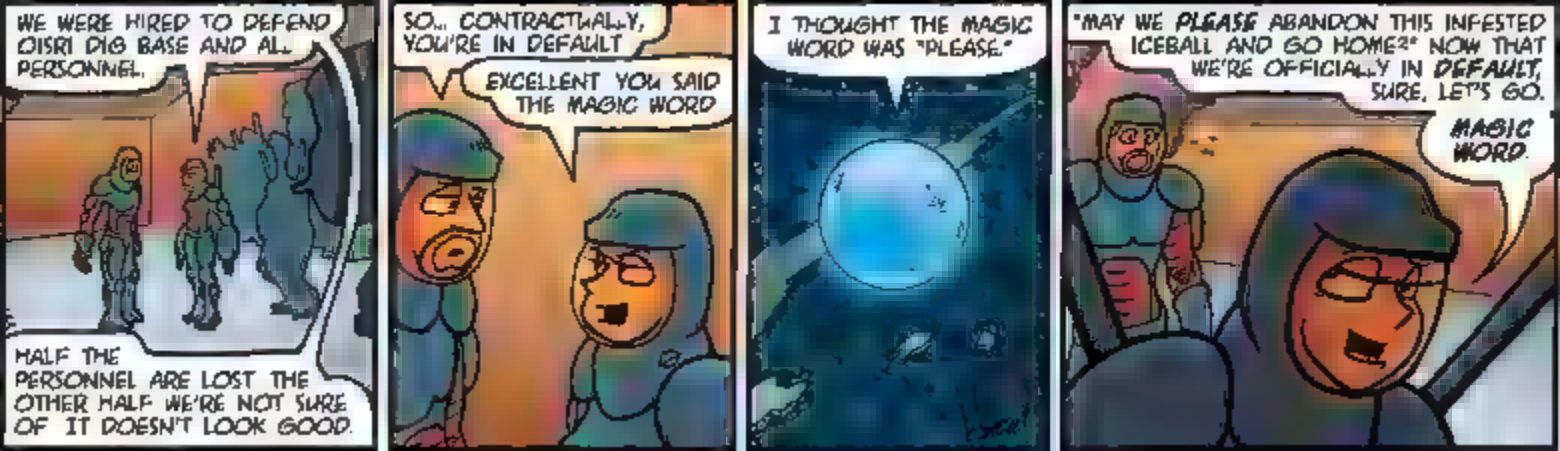

STATION IMO, IN A SECLUDED, UPPER-LEVEL ENGINEERING BAY
Knock-knock!..
WHO'S THERE?
And the moment is ruined.
AND THE MOMENT IS RUINED WHO?

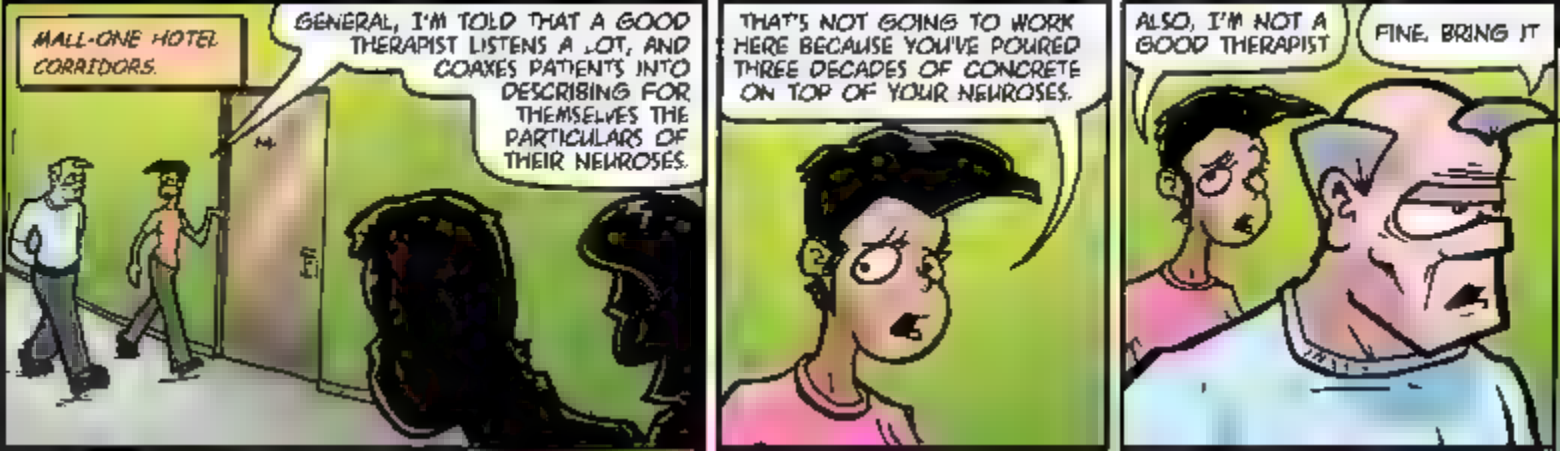

WE'RE IN.
There's a fresh map on your HUD.
I still haven't identified which system is running the sequence you need to stop.
C'MON, SARGE! "AND THE MOMENT IS RUINED BY WHO?"
You, obviously.
That should be "by whom" because the pronoun is being used as an object
NEW STANDING ORDERS. NOBODY IS EVER TO SAY "KNOCK-KNOCK" ON AN OPEN CHANNEL

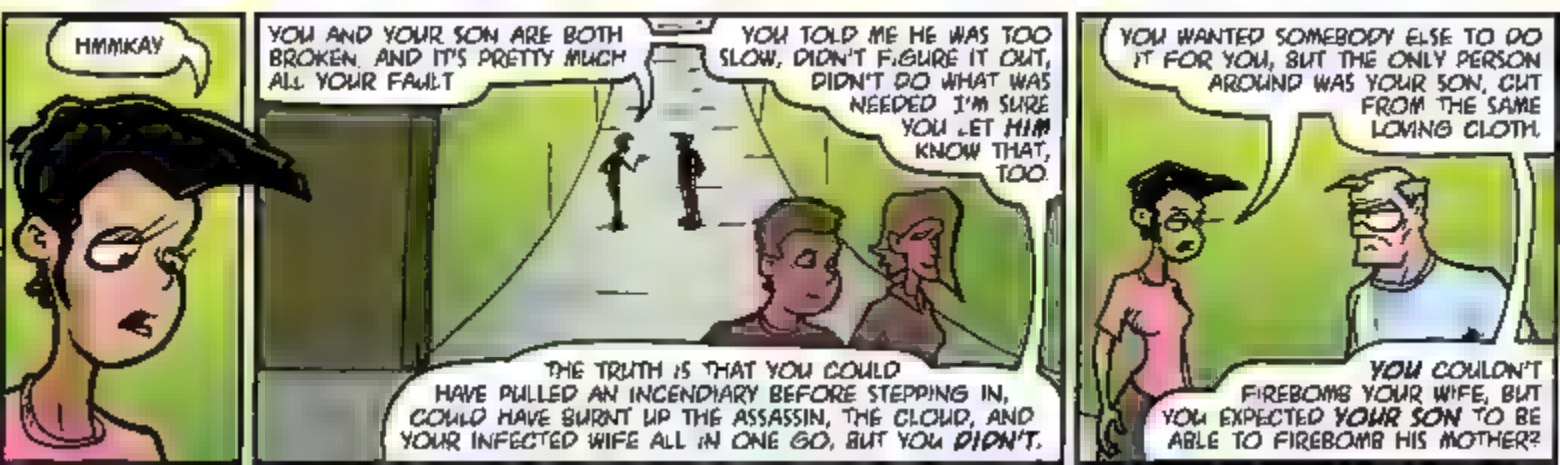

ELSEWHERE IN STATION IMO.
THE MERCENARIES JUST MADE THEIR ENTRANCE.
I'M NOT DONE HERE. HAVE YOU MORPHED ENOUGH TO REPEL?
MY WEAPON PACKAGES HAVEN'T DEVELOPED YET, BUT I CAN MAKE DO WITH STRENGTH AND CUNNING.
OH, AND THIS DRILLING RIG.

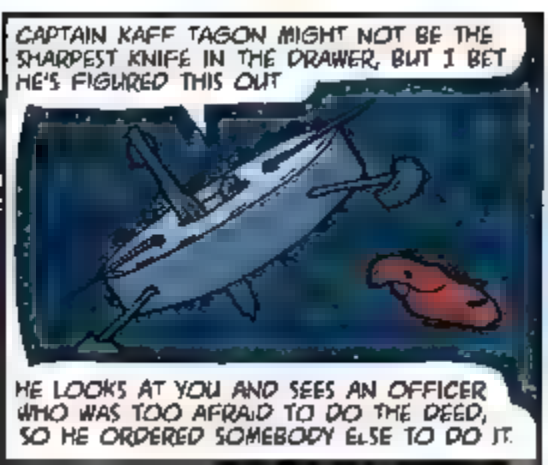

OISRI DIG BASE. SECURITY WING.
THEY'RE RIGHT BEHIND ME! RIGHT BEHIIIIIAAIIIEEEE!
PEW
PEW
PEW
BUM
YOU PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY PRETTY GOOD SHOTS.
IF YOU'D DUCKED WE WOULDN'T HAVE GOTTEN TO SHOW OFF


WHAT'S THE PLAN?
THAT DEPENDS. WHAT'S THE OBJECTIVE?
ABOUT HALF OUR CLIENTS HAVE TURNED INTO ENEMY COMBATANTS, SOME MORE EFFECTIVELY THAN OTHERS.
AS FOR THE OTHER HALF, WELL... MAYBE THEY'VE CHANGED, MAYBE NOT MAYBE THEY WILL. MAYBE THEY WON'T
MAYBE YOU'RE THINKING THIS WOULD BE EASIER IF YOU WERE ALLOWED TO SHOOT EVERYBODY WHO ISN'T ONE OF YOUR OWN?
OH, THAT'S ALWAYS EASIER. ARE YOU PUTTING THAT OPTION ON THE TABLE?
PLEASE?


WE WERE HIRED TO DEFEND DISRI DIG BASE AND ALL PERSONNEL.
HALF THE PERSONNEL ARE LOST THE OTHER HALF WE'RE NOT SURE OF IT DOESN'T LOOK GOOD.
SO... CONTRACTUALLY, YOU'RE IN DEFAULT
EXCELLENT YOU SAID THE MAGIC WORD
I THOUGHT THE MAGIC WORD WAS "PLEASE."
"MAY WE PLEASE ABANDON THIS INFESTED ICEBALL AND GO HOME?" NOW THAT WE'RE OFFICIALLY IN DEFAULT, SURE, LET'S GO.
MAGIC WORD.

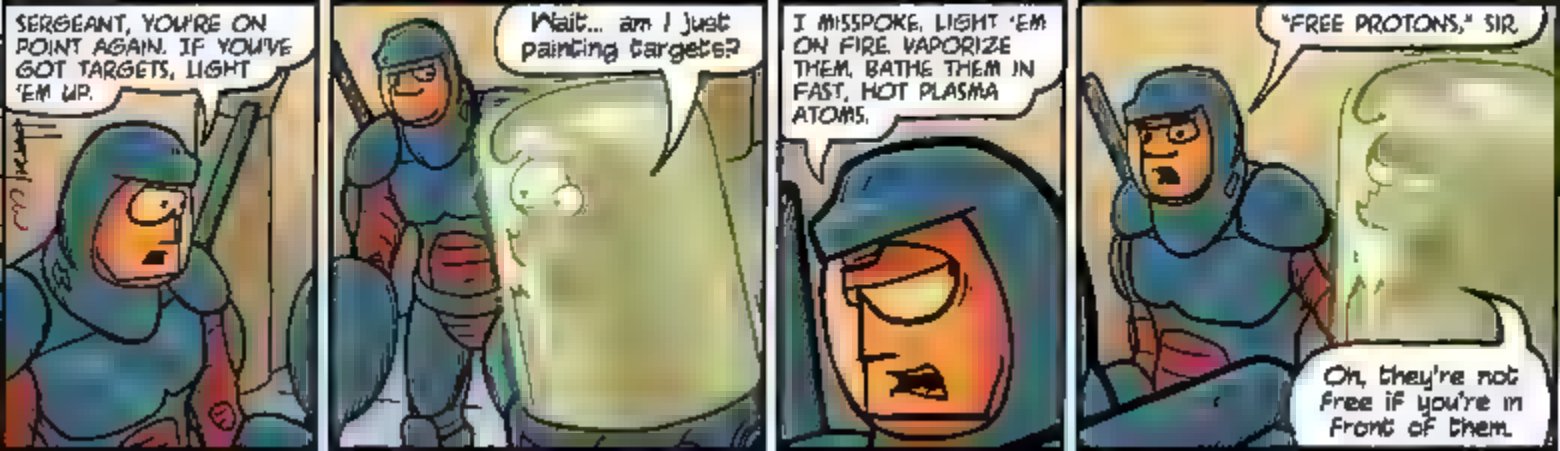

MALL-ONE HOTEL CORRIDORS.
GENERAL, I'M TOLD THAT A GOOD THERAPIST LISTENS A LOT, AND COAXES PATIENTS INTO DESCRIBING FOR THEMSELVES THE PARTICULARS OF THEIR NEUROSES.
THAT'S NOT GOING TO WORK HERE BECAUSE YOU'VE POURED THREE DECADES OF CONCRETE ON TOP OF YOUR NEUROSES.
ALSO, I'M NOT A GOOD THERAPIST
FINE. BRING IT

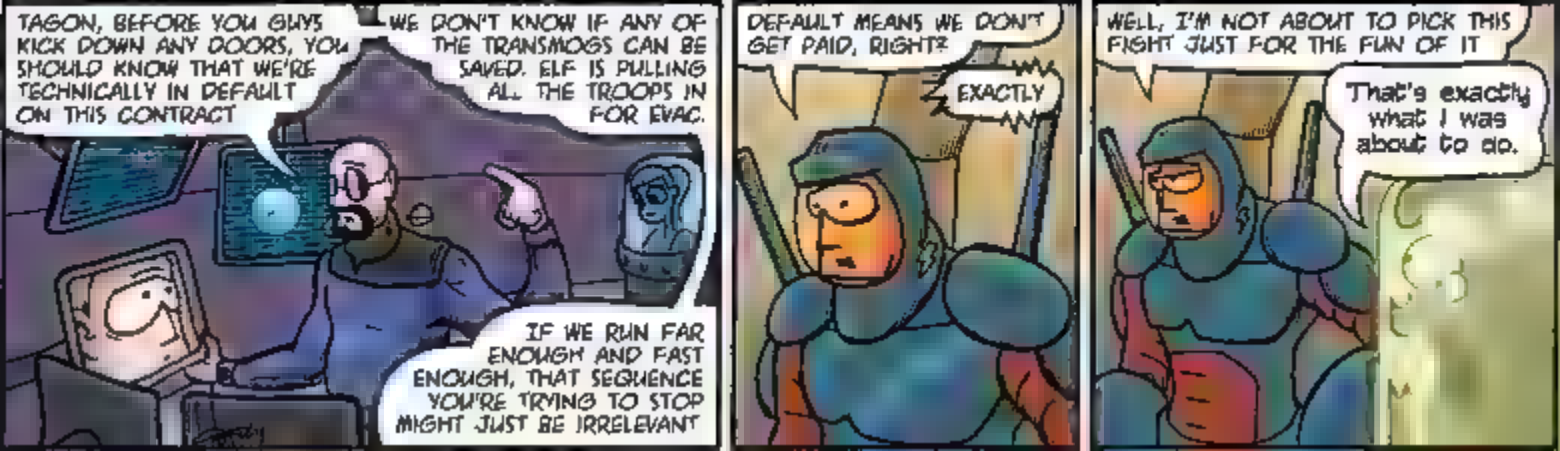

HMMKAY
YOU AND YOUR SON ARE BOTH BROKEN. AND IT'S PRETTY MUCH ALL YOUR FAULT
YOU TOLD ME HE WAS TOO SLOW, DIDN'T FIGURE IT OUT, DIDN'T DO WHAT WAS NEEDED I'M SURE YOU LET HIM KNOW THAT, TOO.
THE TRUTH IS THAT YOU COULD HAVE PULLED AN INCENDIARY BEFORE STEPPING IN, COULD HAVE BURNT UP THE ASSASSIN, THE CLOUD, AND YOUR INFECTED WIFE ALL IN ONE GO, BUT YOU DIDN'T.
YOU WANTED SOMEBODY ELSE TO DO IT FOR YOU, BUT THE ONLY PERSON AROUND WAS YOUR SON, CUT FROM THE SAME LOVING CLOTH.
YOU COULDN'T FIREBOMB YOUR WIFE, BUT YOU EXPECTED YOUR SON TO BE ABLE TO FIREBOMB HIS MOTHER?


CAPTAIN KAFF TAGON MIGHT NOT BE THE SHARPEST KNIFE IN THE DRAWER, BUT I BET HE'S FIGURED THIS OUT
HE LOOKS AT YOU AND SEES AN OFFICER WHO WAS TOO AFRAID TO DO THE DEED, SO HE ORDERED SOMEBODY ELSE TO DO IT.

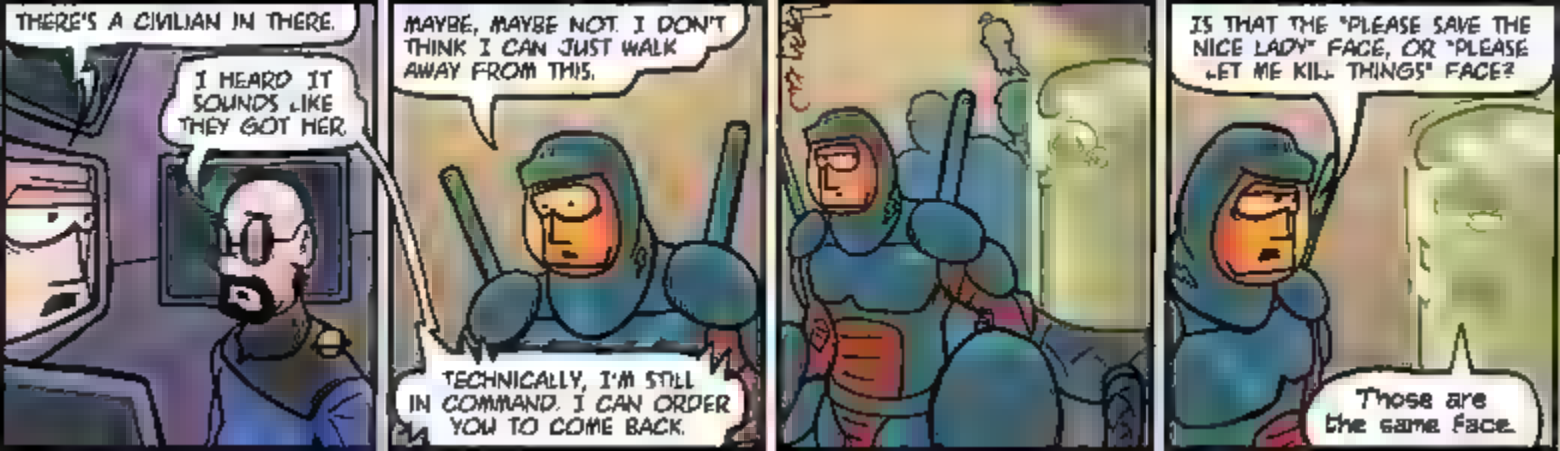

HMPH.
YOU GOT AT LEAST ONE THING RIGHT
REALLY?


YOU'RE NOT A GOOD THERAPIST.


SERGEANT, YOU'RE ON POINT AGAIN. IF YOU'VE GOT TARGETS, LIGHT 'EM UP.
Wait... am I just painting targets?
I MISSPOKE. LIGHT 'EM ON FIRE. VAPORIZE THEM. BATHE THEM IN FAST, HOT PLASMA ATOMS.
"FREE PROTONS," SIR.
Oh, they're not free if you're in front of them.

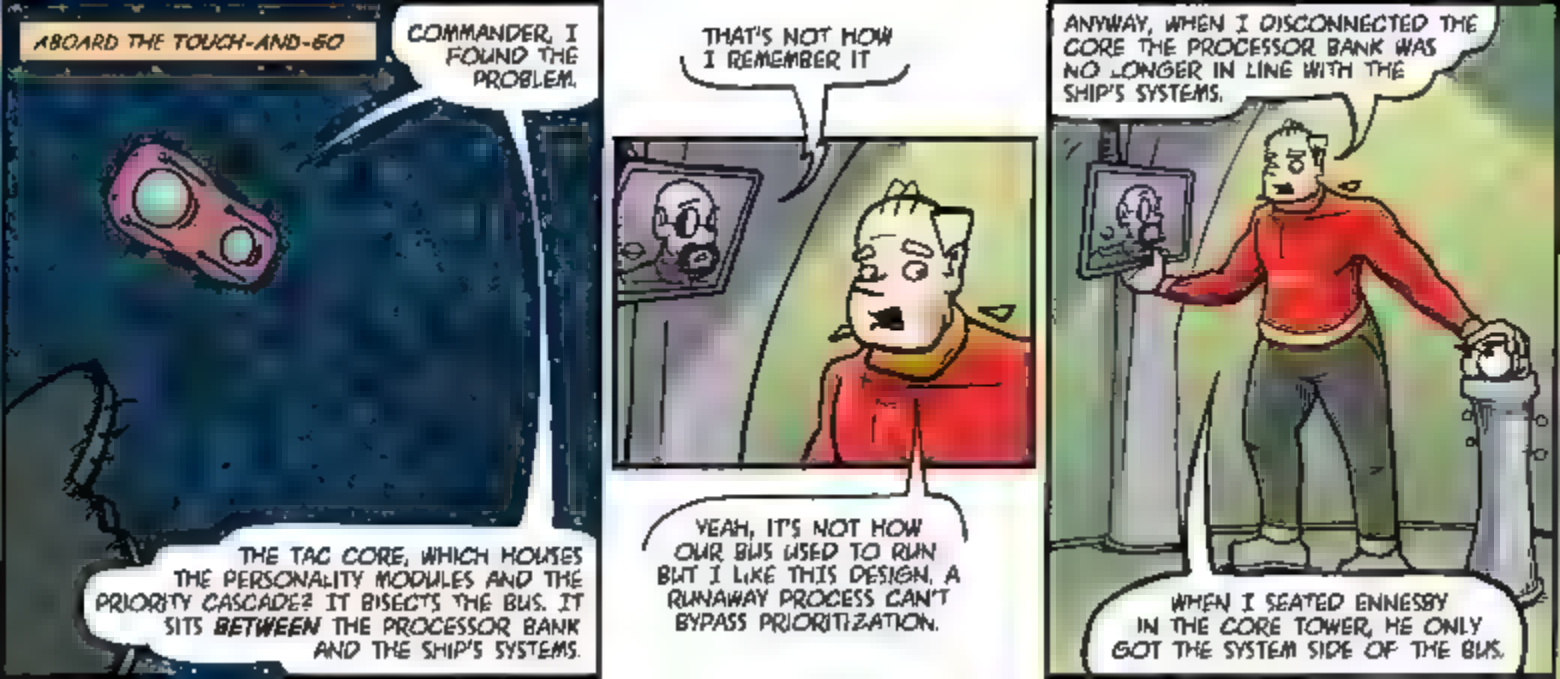

TAGON, BEFORE YOU GUYS KICK DOWN ANY DOORS, YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT WE'RE TECHNICALLY IN DEFAULT ON THIS CONTRACT
WE DON'T KNOW IF ANY OF THE TRANSMOGS CAN BE SAVED. ELF IS PULLING ALL THE TROOPS IN FOR EVAC.
IF WE RUN FAR ENOUGH AND FAST ENOUGH, THAT SEQUENCE YOU'RE TRYING TO STOP MIGHT JUST BE IRRELEVANT
DEFAULT MEANS WE DON'T GET PAID, RIGHT?
EXACTLY
WELL, I'M NOT ABOUT TO PICK THIS FIGHT JUST FOR THE FUN OF IT
That's exactly what I was about to do.

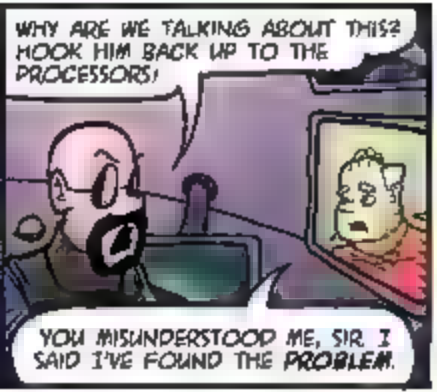

CAPTAIN TAGON! YOU'VE GOT TO HELP ME!
EVERYBODY'S GONE WEIRD, AND THEY'RE CHANGING INTO MONSTERS! ARMOR PLATES, CLAWS, PURE BLACK EYES..
REALLY GOOD HEARING.
OKAY MY HEARING IS FAIRLY ORDINARY YOU'RE JUST LOUD.

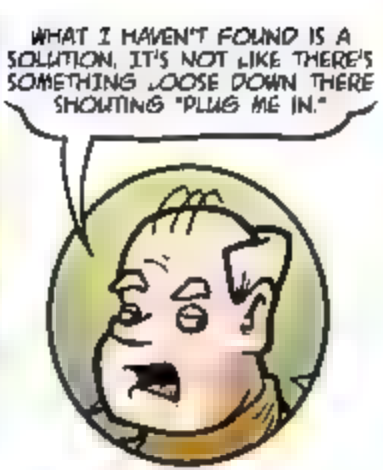

THERE'S A CIVILIAN IN THERE.
I HEARD IT SOUNDS LIKE THEY GOT HER
MAYBE, MAYBE NOT. I DON'T THINK I CAN JUST WALK AWAY FROM THIS.
TECHNICALLY, I'M STILL IN COMMAND. I CAN ORDER YOU TO COME BACK.
IS THAT THE "PLEASE SAVE THE NICE LADY" FACE, OR "PLEASE LET ME KILL THINGS" FACE?
Those are the same face.

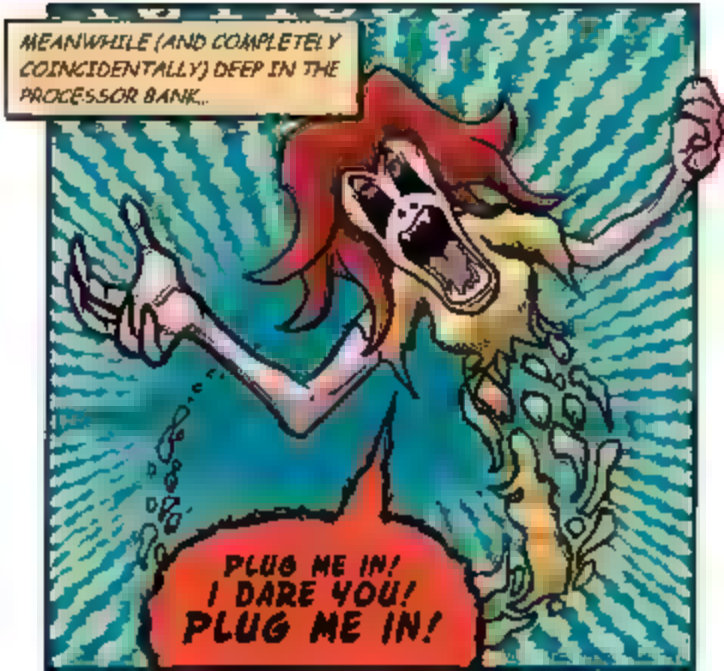

KEVYN, I THINK I'M READY FOR YOU TO HAND THE COMMAND BACK OVER TO ME.
YOU'RE GOING TO DO SOMETHING HEROIC WITH IT
MAYBE IT'S HEROIC. MAYBE IT'S JUST GOOD MARKETING
IT'S HARD TO WIN NEW CLIENTS IF YOU'RE DEAD
THE DEAD DON'T HAVE TROUBLE FALLING ASLEEP
BUT WAKING UP IS A NEAT TRICK. CAPTAIN.


COMMAND IS YOURS CAPTAIN.
RECEIVED THANK YOU, COMMANDER.
MY TEAM WILL SWEEP THE DIG STATION, RESCUE ANY SURVIVORS, AND STOP THAT SEQUENCE THINGY, WHATEVER IT IS.
ELF! EVAC ALL BUT ONE PLATOON. HAVE THEM SWEEP THE SURFACE BUILDINGS. NEUTRALIZE THE HOSTILES, ROUND UP ANY SURVIVORS.
ENNESBY,. FIGURE OUT HOW TO PROVIDE OVERWATCH AGAIN. WE NEED AIR SUPPORT
MASSEY! LOOP HOLE US OUT OF DEFAULT ON THE CONTRACT I WANT TO GET PAID FOR ALL THIS HARD WORK.
OH, MY
NO PRESSURE, SOLDIER.

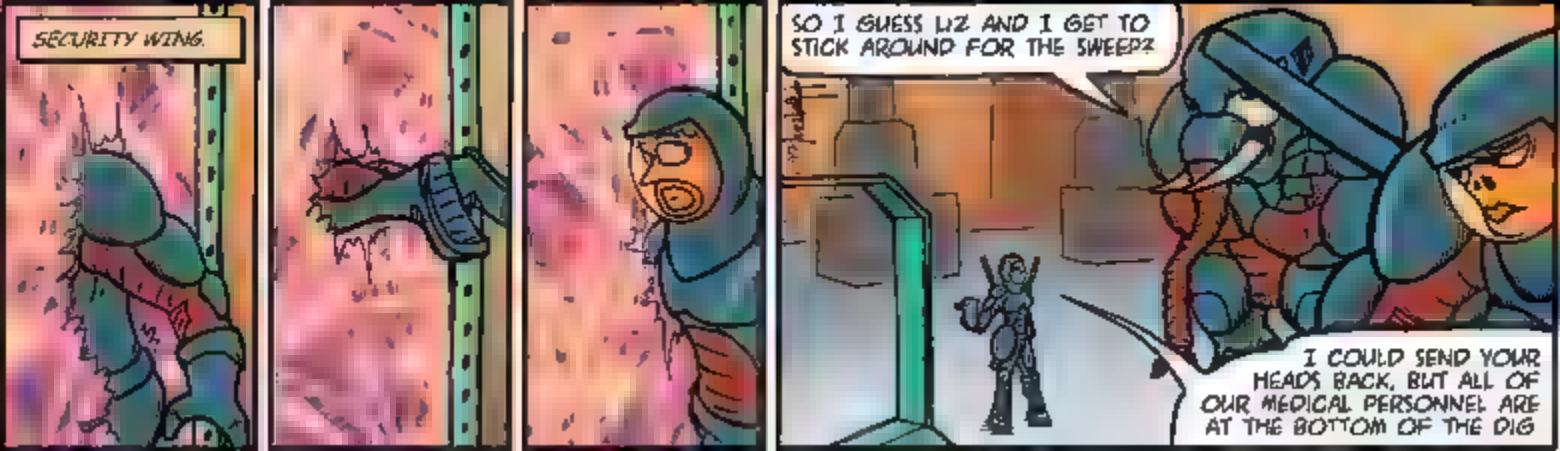

ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO
COMMANDER, I FOUND THE PROBLEM.
THE TAC CORE, WHICH HOUSES THE PERSONALITY MODULES AND THE PRIORITY CASCADE? IT BISECTS THE BUS. IT SITS BETWEEN THE PROCESSOR BANK AND THE SHIP'S SYSTEMS.
THAT'S NOT HOW I REMEMBER IT
YEAH, IT'S NOT HOW OUR BUS USED TO RUN BUT I LIKE THIS DESIGN. A RUNAWAY PROCESS CAN'T BYPASS PRIORITIZATION.
ANYWAY, WHEN I DISCONNECTED THE CORE THE PROCESSOR BANK WAS NO LONGER IN LINE WITH THE SHIP'S SYSTEMS.
WHEN I SEATED ENNESBY IN THE CORE TOWER, HE ONLY GOT THE SYSTEM SIDE OF THE BUS.


WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT THIS? HOOK HIM BACK UP TO THE PROCESSORS!
YOU MISUNDERSTOOD ME, SIR. I SAID I'VE FOUND THE PROBLEM.

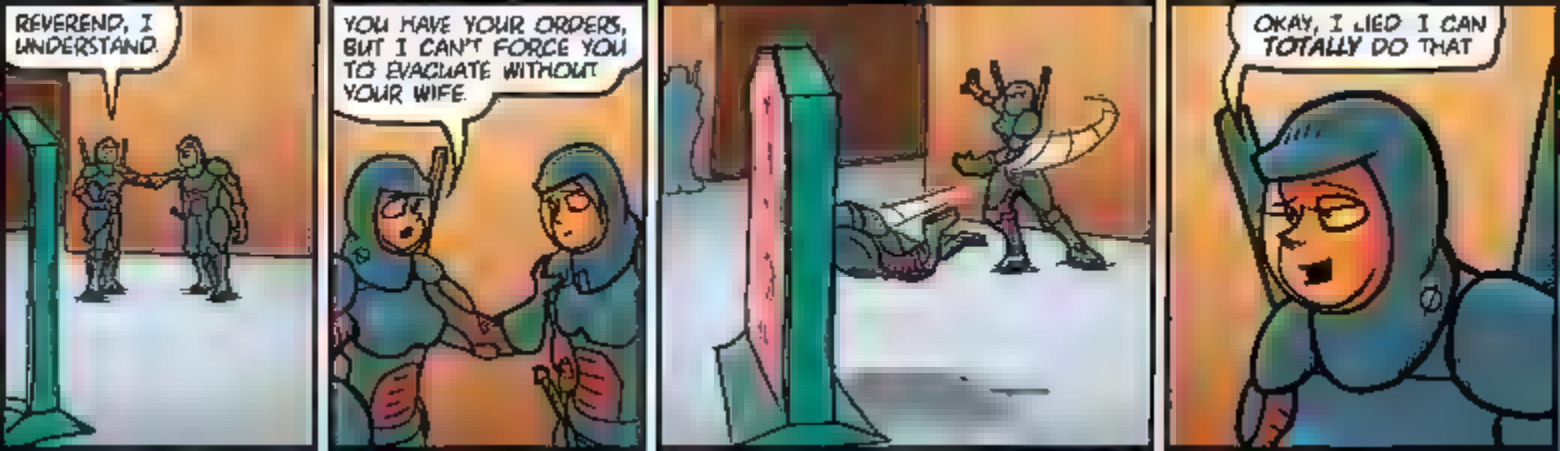

WHAT I HAVEN'T FOUND IS A SOLUTION. IT'S NOT LIKE THERE'S SOMETHING LOOSE DOWN THERE SHOUTING "PLUG ME IN."

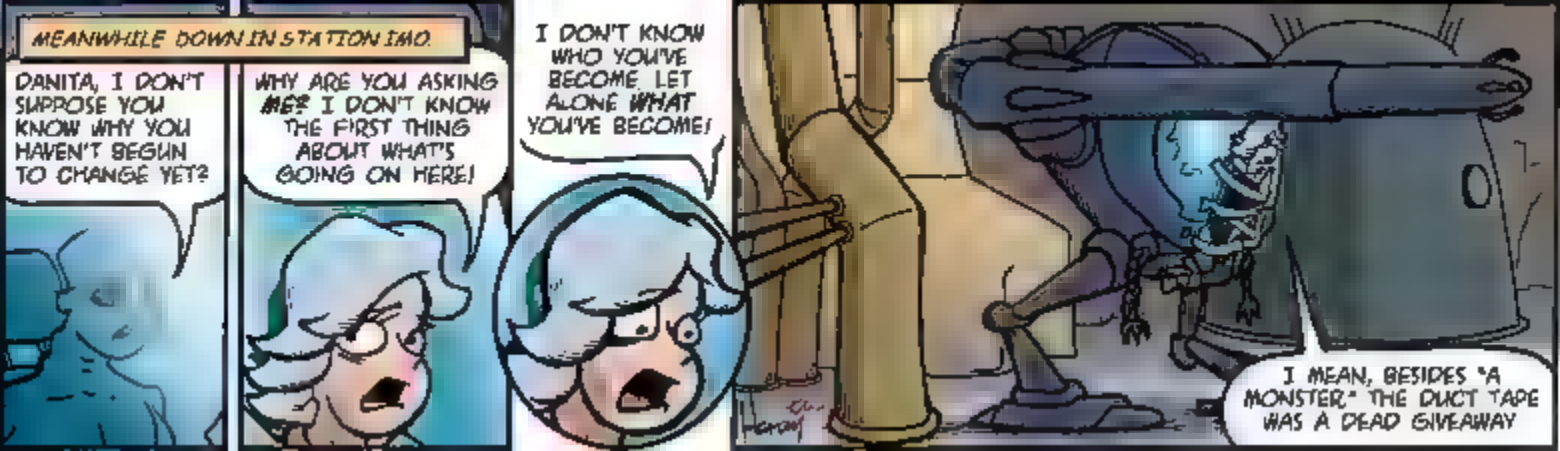

MEANWHILE (AND COMPLETELY COINCIDENTALLY) DEEP IN THE PROCESSOR BANK...
PLUG ME IN! I DARE YOU! PLUG ME IN!

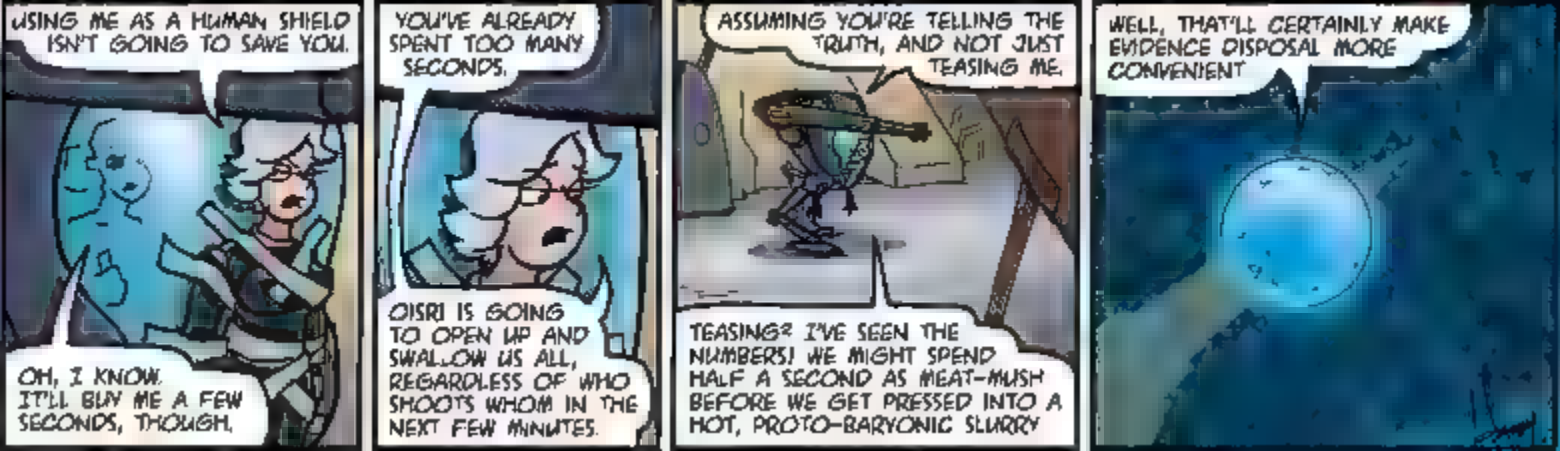

TOUCH AND GO..
Long, compulsory-hachy story short: I can't provide overwatch, sir. If you're going to stop that sequence, you have to go now.
I do still have the surveillance feeds, however. I can help you pick targets...
STATION IMO.
YOU SOUND LIKE THERE'S A "BUT" COMING.
But you're the Captain, and this would mean I'm calling the shots.
Sat it? "Calling the shots?"

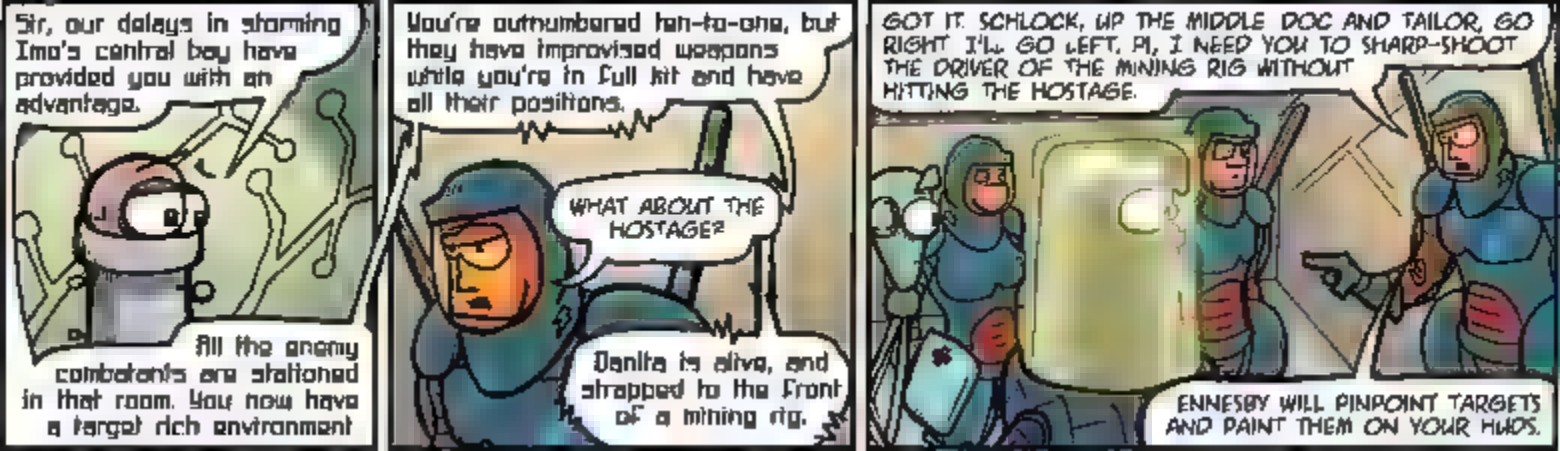

SECURITY WING.
SO I GUESS LIZ AND I GET TO STICK AROUND FOR THE SWEEP?
I COULD SEND YOUR HEADS BACK, BUT ALL OF OUR MEDICAL PERSONNEL ARE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE DIG


REVEREND, IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO GO. THE NEXT EVAC IS ISN'T UNTIL AFTER THE SWEEP
HOW ARE WE GETTING MY WIFE AND THE OTHERS OUT OF THE BOTTOM OF THE DIG?
THAT'S NOT YOUR PROBLEM.
AND IF YOUR BOYFRIEND HAPPENED TO BE DOWN THERE?
IT STILL WOULDN'T BE YOUR PROBLEM.

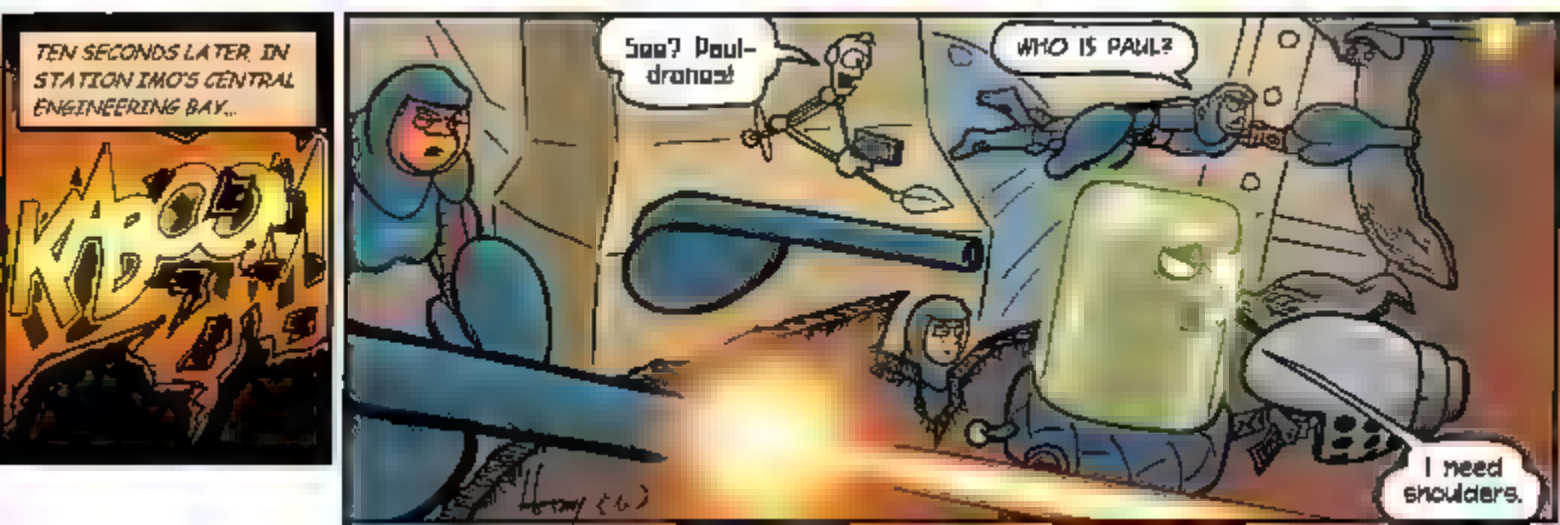

REVEREND, I UNDERSTAND.
YOU HAVE YOUR ORDERS, BUT I CAN'T FORCE YOU TO EVACUATE WITHOUT YOUR WIFE.
OKAY, I LIED I CAN TOTALLY DO THAT


MEANWHILE DOWN IN STATION IMO.
DANITA, I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU KNOW WHY YOU HAVEN'T BEGUN TO CHANGE YET?
WHY ARE YOU ASKING ME? I DON'T KNOW THE FIRST THING ABOUT WHAT'S GOING ON HERE!
I DON'T KNOW WHO YOU'VE BECOME, LET ALONE WHAT YOU'VE BECOME!
I MEAN, BESIDES "A MONSTER." THE DUCT TAPE WAS A DEAD GIVEAWAY

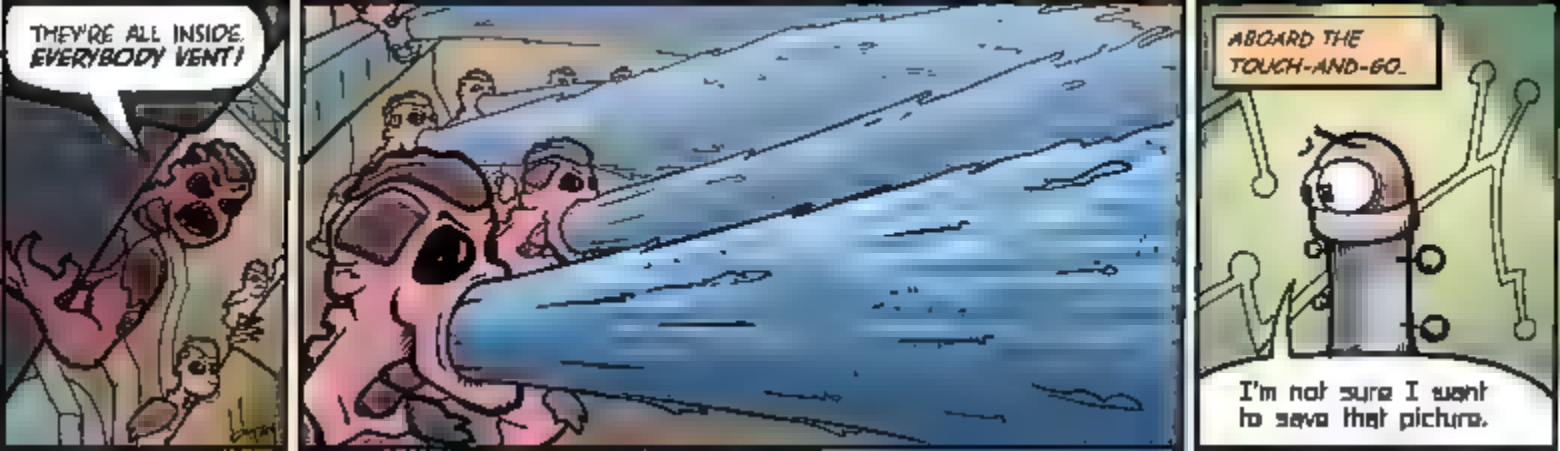

USING ME AS A HUMAN SHIELD ISN'T GOING TO SAVE YOU.
OH, I KNOW. IT'LL BUY ME A FEW SECONDS, THOUGH.
YOU'VE ALREADY SPENT TOO MANY SECONDS.
OISRI IS GOING TO OPEN UP AND SWALLOW US ALL, REGARDLESS OF WHO SHOOTS WHOM IN THE NEXT FEW MINUTES.
ASSUMING YOU'RE TELLING THE TRUTH, AND NOT JUST TEASING ME.
TEASING? I'VE SEEN THE NUMBERS! WE MIGHT SPEND HALF A SECOND AS MEAT-MUSH BEFORE WE GET PRESSED INTO A HOT, PROTO-BARYONIC SLURRY
WELL, THAT'LL CERTAINLY MAKE EVIDENCE DISPOSAL MORE CONVENIENT

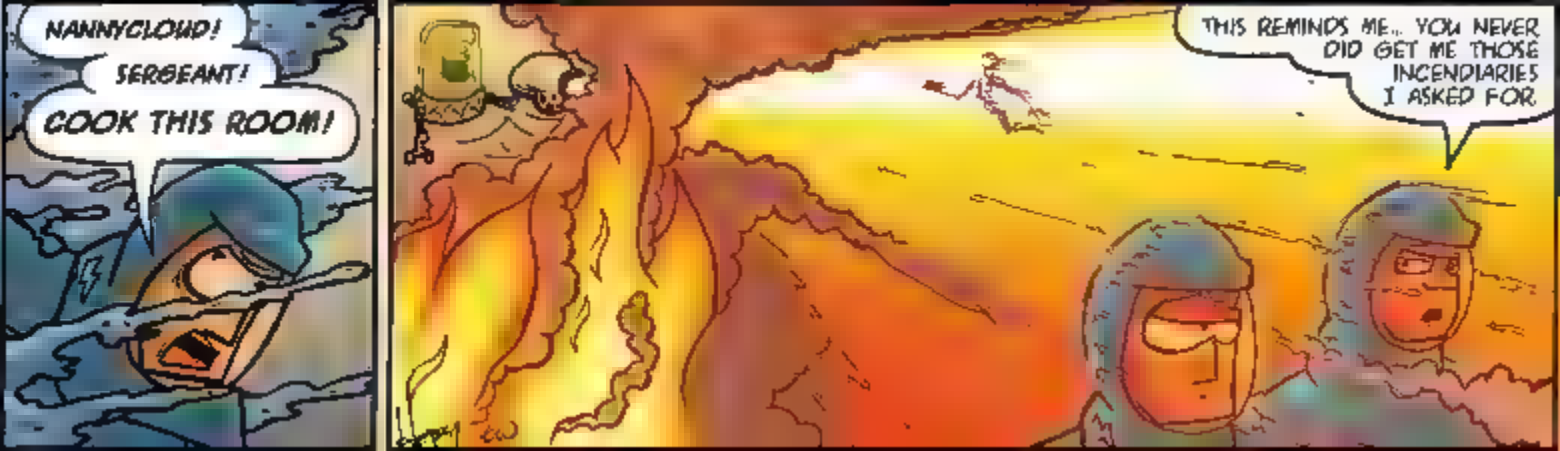

Sir, our delays in storming Imo's central bay have provided you with an advantage.
All the enemy combatants are stationed in that room. You now have a target rich environment
You're outnumbered ten-to-one, but they have improvised weapons while you're in full kit and have all their positions.
WHAT ABOUT THE HOSTAGE?
Danita is alive, and strapped to the front of a mining rig.
GOT IT. SCHLOCK, UP THE MIDDLE. DOC AND TAILOR, GO RIGHT. I'LL GO LEFT. PI, I NEED YOU TO SHARP-SHOOT THE DRIVER OF THE MINING RIG WITHOUT HITTING THE HOSTAGE.
ENNESBY WILL PINPOINT TARGETS AND PAINT THEM ON YOUR HUDS.

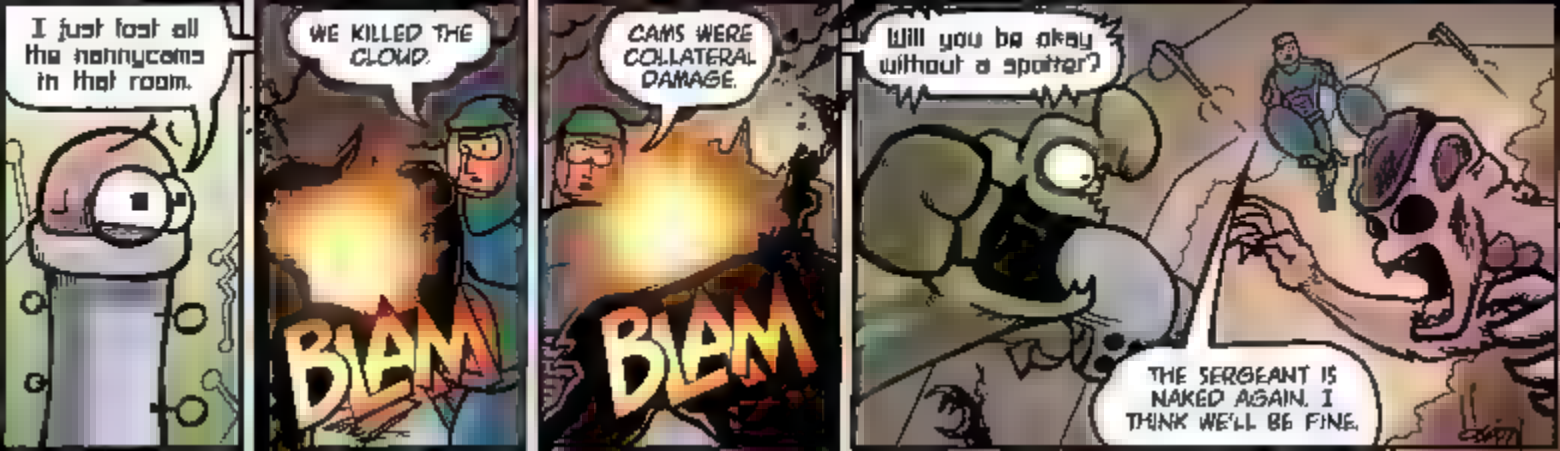

Sir, You and PI both have pauldron cannons with S.I. drivers. Might I suggest you set them for full autonomy?
I THOUGHT THAT WAS HOW I HAD THEM SET
Not if they're still attached to your shoulders.


TEN SECONDS LATER, IN STATION IMO'S CENTRAL ENGINEERING BAY...
KABOOM
See? Paul-drones!
WHO IS PAUL?
I need shoulders.


AAAAIIEEE!
NAZORCH
AAAAIIEEE!
OH COME ON. THAT SHOT WAS PERFECT

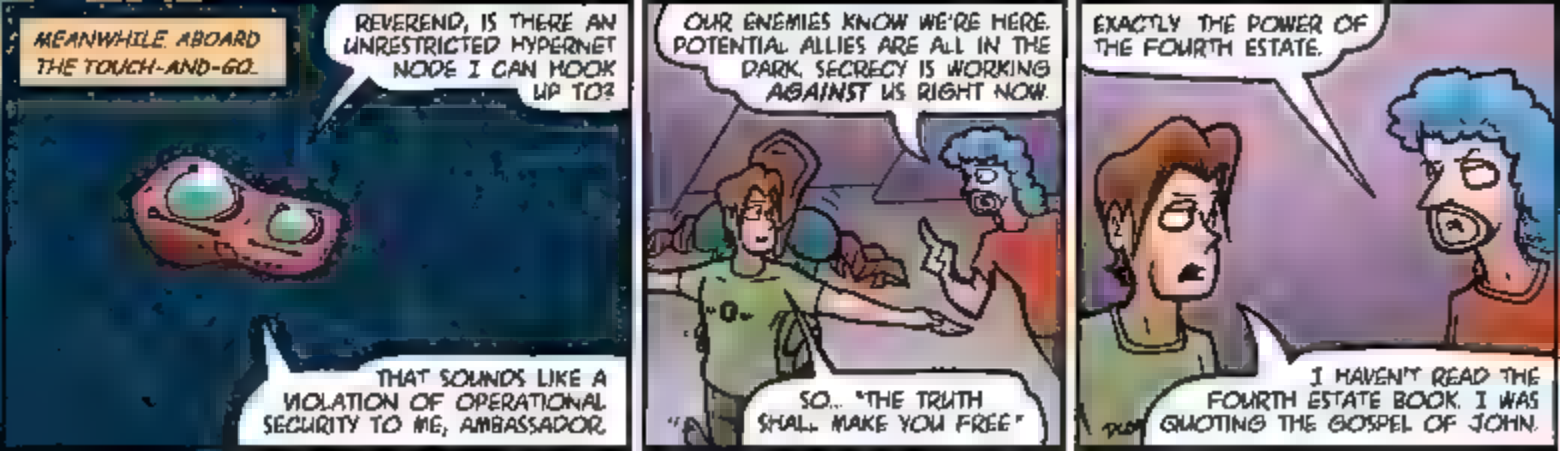

THEY'RE ALL INSIDE. EVERYBODY VENT!
ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO.
I'm not sure I want to save that picture.

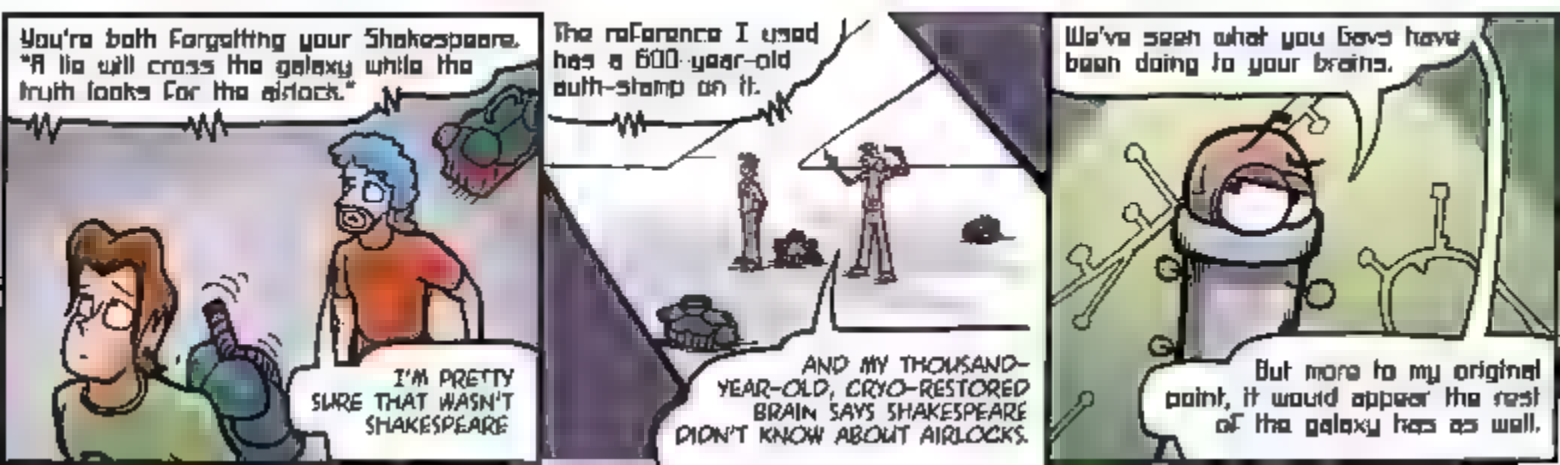

NANNYCLOUD!
SERGEANT!
COOK THIS ROOM!
THIS REMINDS ME... YOU NEVER DID GET ME THOSE INCENDIARIES I ASKED FOR

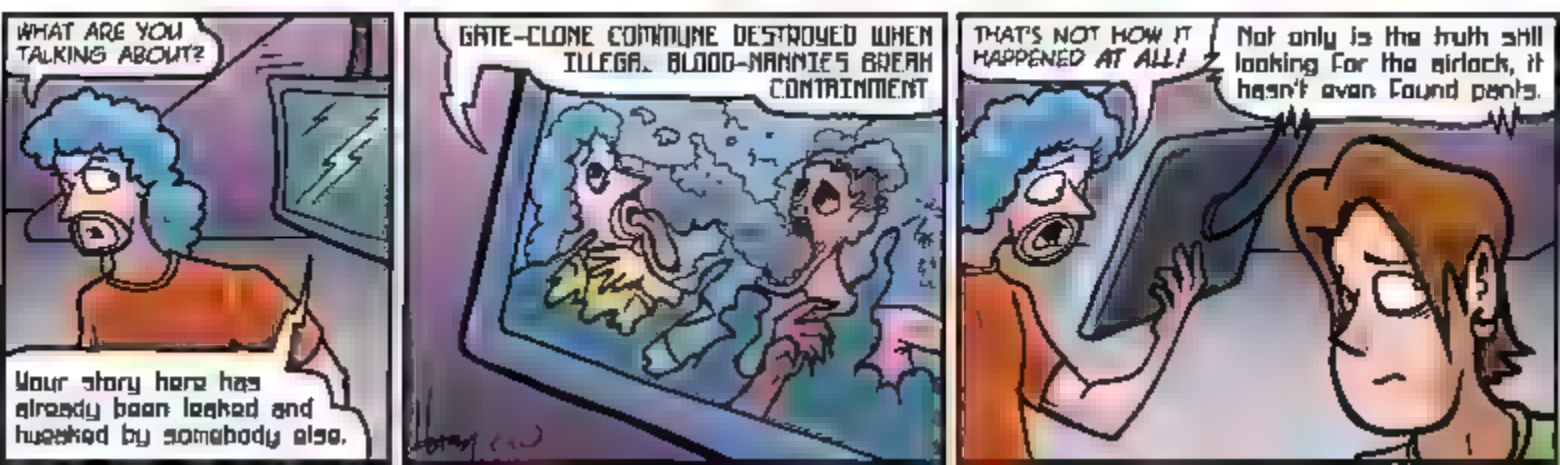

I just lost all the nannycams in that room.
WE KILLED THE CLOUD.
BLAM
CAMS WERE COLLATERAL DAMAGE.
BLAM
Will you be okay without a spotter?
THE SERGEANT IS NAKED AGAIN. I THINK WE'LL BE FINE.


BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
Captain, you need to let your paul-drones come out and play more often.
NAKED-TIME IS OVER GET BACK IN YOUR BOTTLE

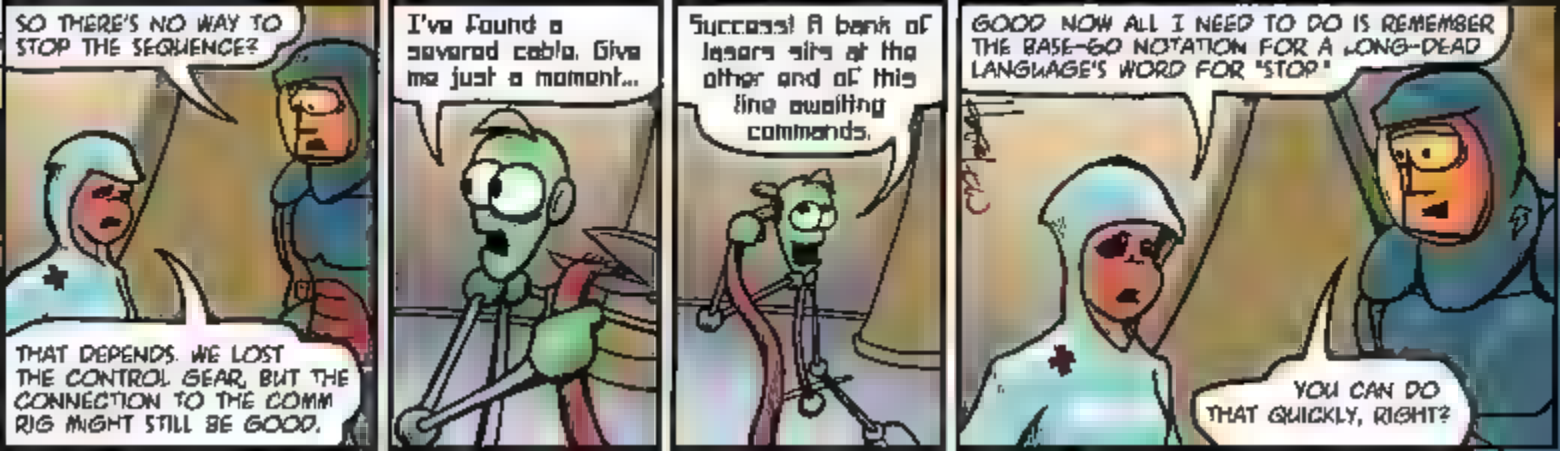

DANITA, CAN YOU HEAR ME?
YES, BUT I CAN'T SEE.
THE FIGHT'S OVER. WE WON. YOUR EMERGENCY HELMET DEPLOYED, BUT THINGS GOT PRETTY HOT IN HERE
I'VE APPLIED SPRITSKIN EVERYWHERE YOU GOT EXPOSED. YOU'RE GOING TO BE FINE.
I CAN'T SEE. DID YOU PUT FOAM OVER MY EYES?
FUNNY YOU SHOULD ASK.

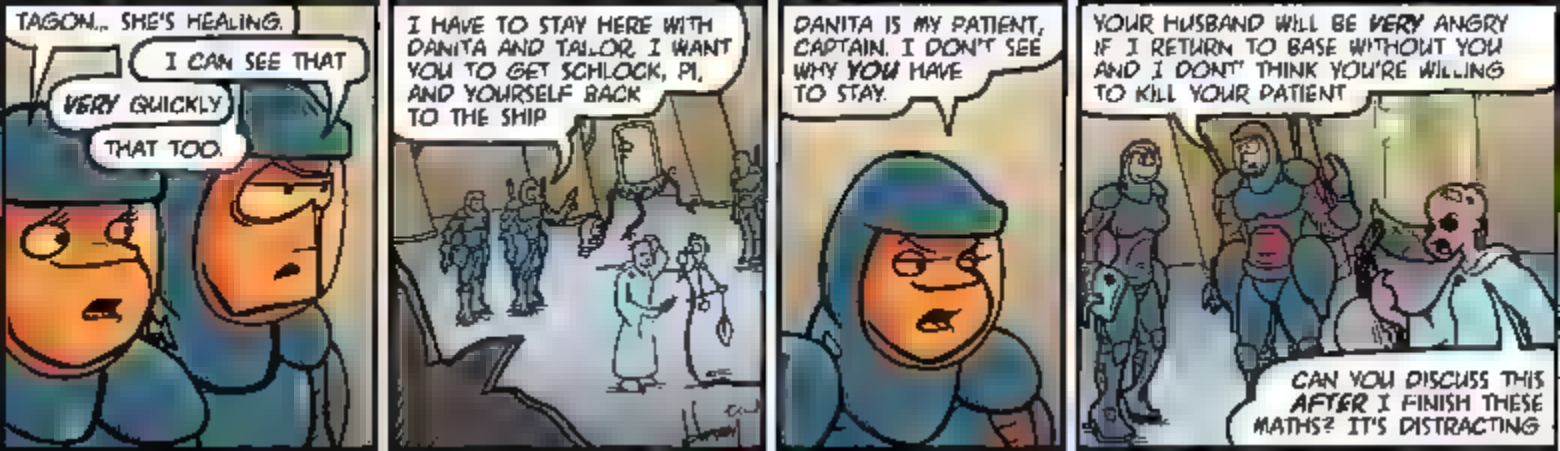

MEANWHILE ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO.
REVEREND, IS THERE AN UNRESTRICTED HYPERNET NODE I CAN HOOK UP TO?
THAT SOUNDS LIKE A VIOLATION OF OPERATIONAL SECURITY TO ME, AMBASSADOR.
OUR ENEMIES KNOW WE'RE HERE. POTENTIAL ALLIES ARE ALL IN THE DARK. SECRECY IS WORKING AGAINST US RIGHT NOW.
SO... "THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE"
EXACTLY. THE POWER OF THE FOURTH ESTATE.
I HAVEN'T READ THE FOURTH ESTATE BOOK. I WAS QUOTING THE GOSPEL OF JOHN.

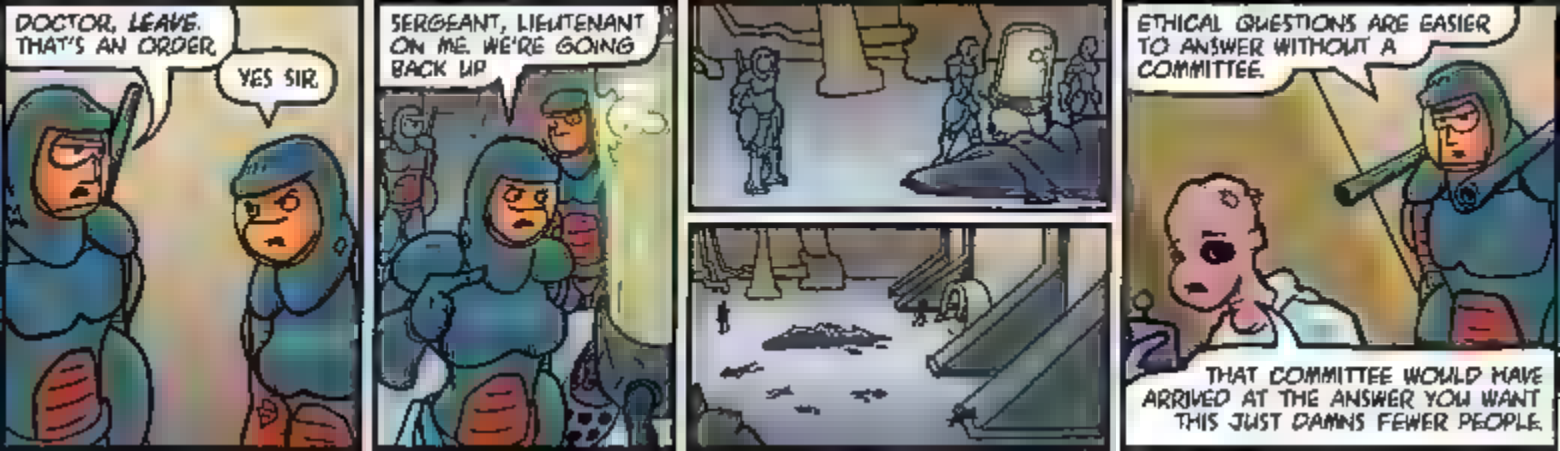

You're both forgetting your Shakespeare. "A lie will cross the galaxy while the truth looks for the airlock."
I'M PRETTY SURE THAT WASN'T SHAKESPEARE
The reference I used has a 600-year-old auth-stamp on it.
AND MY THOUSAND-YEAR-OLD, CRYO-RESTORED BRAIN SAYS SHAKESPEARE DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT AIRLOCKS.
We've seen what you Gave have been doing to your brains.
But more to my original point, it would appear the rest of the galaxy has as well.


WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
Your story here has already been leaked and tweeked by somebody else.
GATE-CLONE COMMUNE DESTROYED WHEN ILLEGAL BLOOD-NANNIES BREAK CONTAINMENT
THAT'S NOT HOW IT HAPPENED AT ALL!
Not only is the truth still looking for the airlock, it hasn't even found pants.

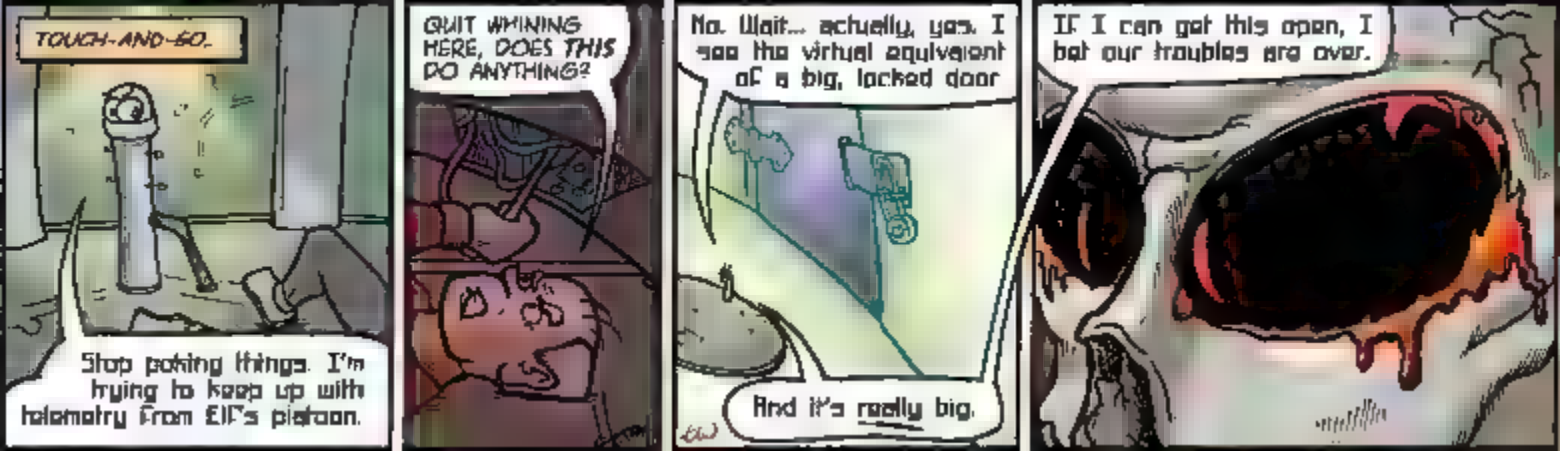

STATION IMO.
DANITA, THERE'S A SEQUENCE RUNNING ON SOME SYSTEM DOWN HERE. WE NEED TO STOP IT
IT'S NOT "DOWN HERE" "DOWN THERE."
ALL WE DID WAS SEND THE COMMAND. OISRI IS EXECUTING IT
CAN WE SEND A COMMAND TO MAKE OISRI STOP EXECUTING?
THAT DEPENDS ON WHETHER MY FORMER COLLEAGUES SLAGGED THE SYSTEM WHEN THEY FINISHED STEALING OUR RESEARCH.
HAH! THAT EXPLAINS THIS STEAMING PILE OF Q-CIRC!

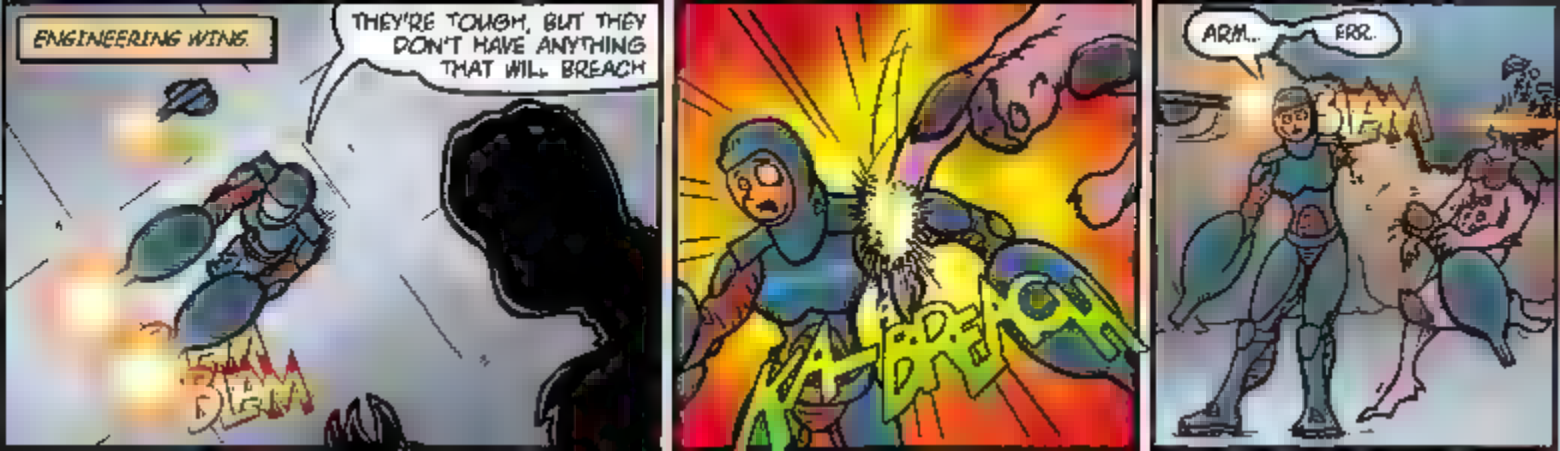

SO THERE'S NO WAY TO STOP THE SEQUENCE?
THAT DEPENDS. WE LOST THE CONTROL GEAR, BUT THE CONNECTION TO THE COMM RIG MIGHT STILL BE GOOD.
I've found a severed cable. Give me just a moment...
Success! A bank of lasers sits at the other end of this line awaiting commands.
GOOD. NOW ALL I NEED TO DO IS REMEMBER THE BASE-60 NOTATION FOR A LONG-DEAD LANGUAGE'S WORD FOR "STOP."
YOU CAN DO THAT QUICKLY, RIGHT?


TAGON... SHE'S HEALING.
I CAN SEE THAT
VERY QUICKLY
THAT TOO.
I HAVE TO STAY HERE WITH DANITA AND TAILOR. I WANT YOU TO GET SCHLOCK, PI, AND YOURSELF BACK TO THE SHIP
DANITA IS MY PATIENT, CAPTAIN. I DON'T SEE WHY YOU HAVE TO STAY.
YOUR HUSBAND WILL BE VERY ANGRY IF I RETURN TO BASE WITHOUT YOU AND I DON'T THINK YOU'RE WILLING TO KILL YOUR PATIENT
CAN YOU DISCUSS THIS AFTER I FINISH THESE MATHS? IT'S DISTRACTING

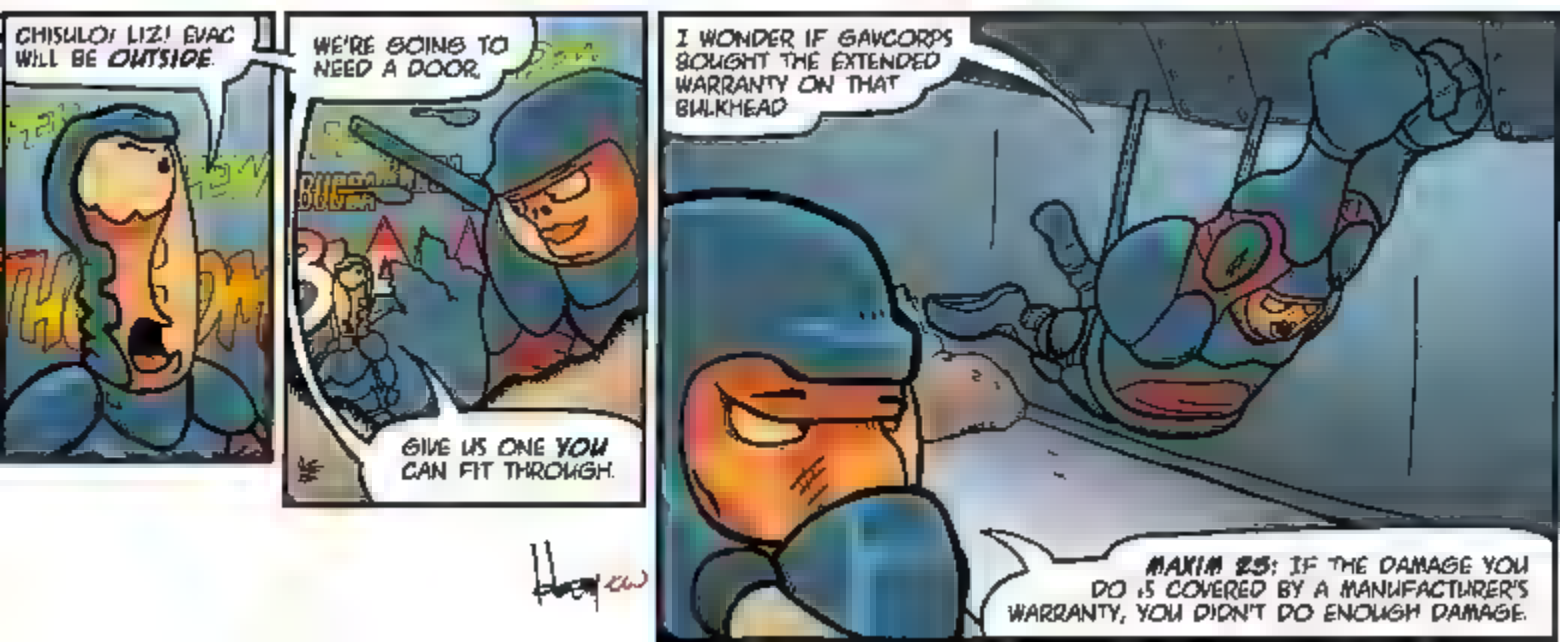

DOCTOR, LEAVE. THAT'S AN ORDER.
YES SIR.
SERGEANT, LIEUTENANT ON ME. WE'RE GOING BACK UP
ETHICAL QUESTIONS ARE EASIER TO ANSWER WITHOUT A COMMITTEE.
THAT COMMITTEE WOULD HAVE ARRIVED AT THE ANSWER YOU WANT THIS JUST DAMNS FEWER PEOPLE.

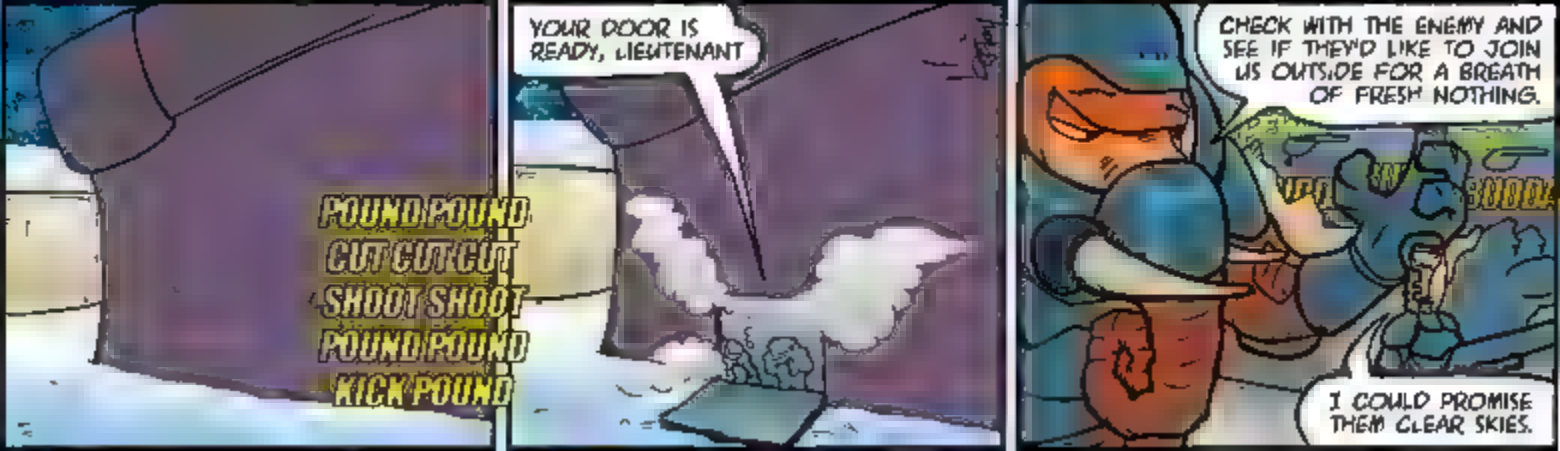

OISRI DIG BASE ENGINEERING WING.
MORE DEAD. NO HOSTILES.
UNTIL THE DEAD START GETTING UP AND BECOMING HOSTILE
WE NEED TO WORK ON YOUR TIMING.
I THOUGHT IT WAS PERFECT

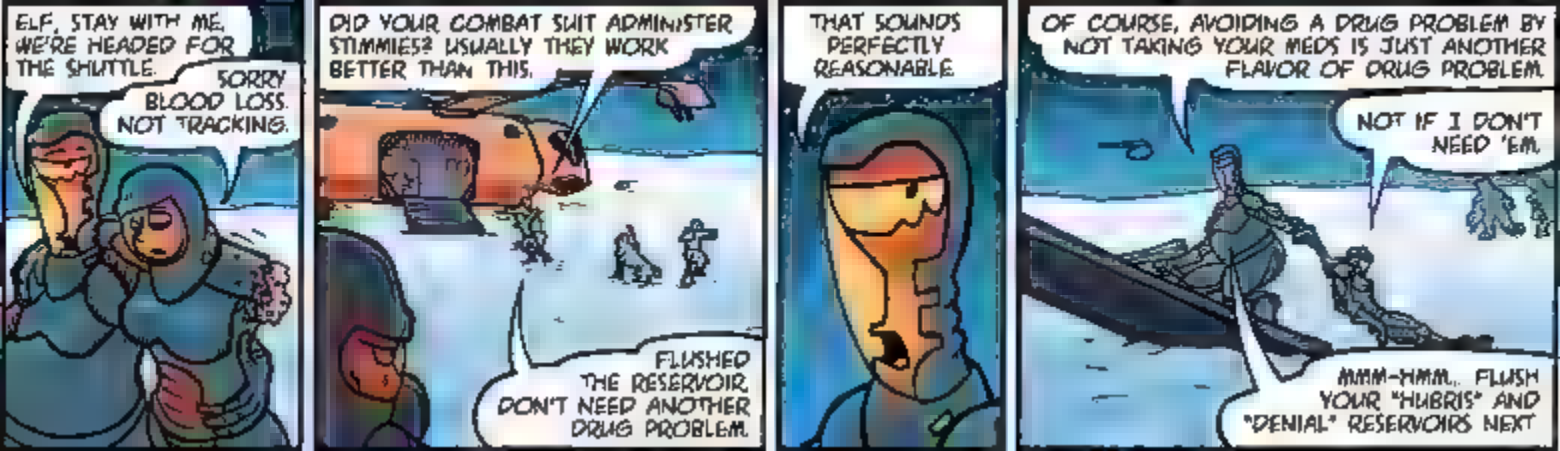

TOUCH-AND-GO.
Stop poking things. I'm trying to keep up with telemetry from EIC's platoon.
QUIT WHINING HERE, DOES THIS DO ANYTHING?
No. Wait... actually, yes. I see the virtual equivalent of a big, locked door
And it's really big.
If I can get this open, I bet our troubles are over.

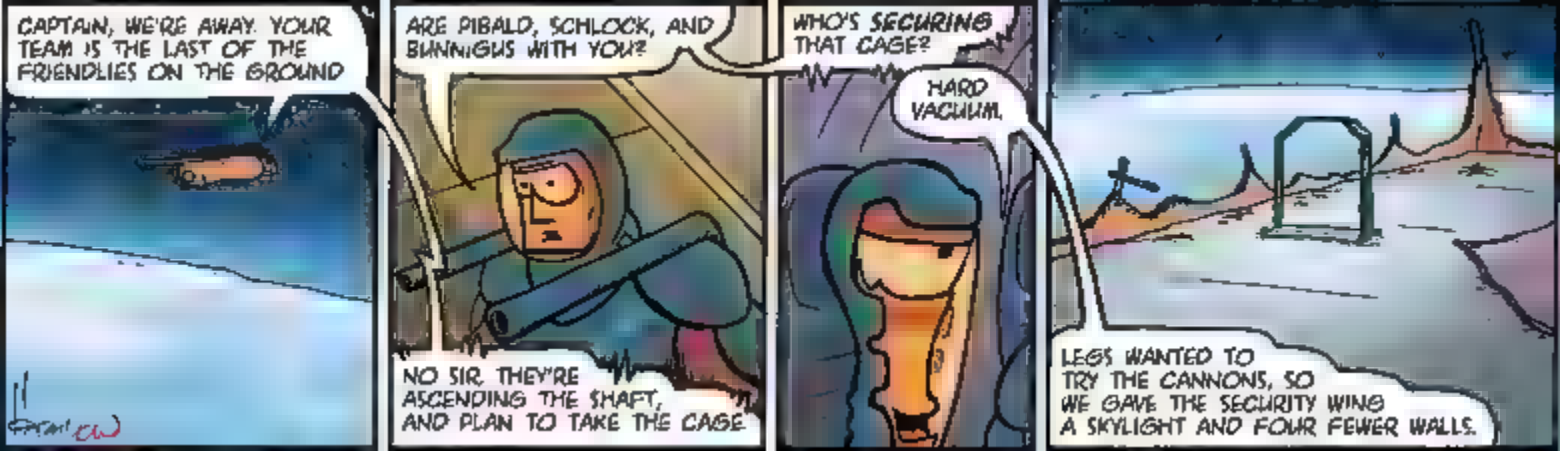

ENGINEERING WING.
THEY'RE TOUGH, BUT THEY DON'T HAVE ANYTHING THAT WILL BREACH
BLAM BLAM
A-BREACH
ARM..
ERR.
BLAM


THEY GREW ARMOR-PIERCING FISTS?
UNGH.. TAKE COMMAND, LIEUTENANT
ON IT, COMMANDER. YOU FALL BACK.
LEGS, COME AND GET US. WE HAVEN'T FOUND ANY SURVIVORS, AND THIS FIGHT IS STARTING TO GET EXPENSIVE.
DO NOT USE THE DOCK. EVERYBODY WHO NEEDS A RIDE HAS A HELMET.
UNDERSTOOD I'LL TAKE PRECAUTIONS.

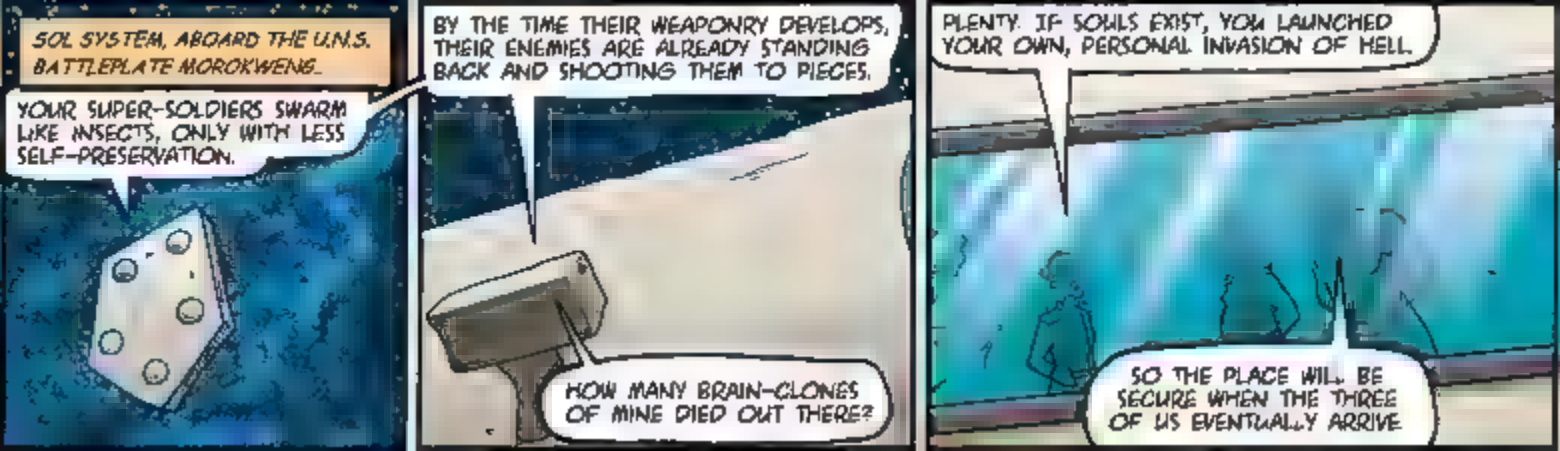

CHISULO! LIZ! EVAC WILL BE OUTSIDE.
WE'RE GOING TO NEED A DOOR.
BUSH
BAM
GIVE US ONE YOU CAN FIT THROUGH.
I WONDER IF GAVCORPS BOUGHT THE EXTENDED WARRANTY ON THAT BULKHEAD
MAXIM 25: IF THE DAMAGE YOU DO IS COVERED BY A MANUFACTURER'S WARRANTY, YOU DIDN'T DO ENOUGH DAMAGE.


POUND POUND
CUT CUT CUT
SHOOT SHOOT
POUND POUND
KICK POUND
YOUR DOOR IS READY, LIEUTENANT
CHECK WITH THE ENEMY AND SEE IF THEY'D LIKE TO JOIN US OUTSIDE FOR A BREATH OF FRESH NOTHING.
I COULD PROMISE THEM CLEAR SKIES.

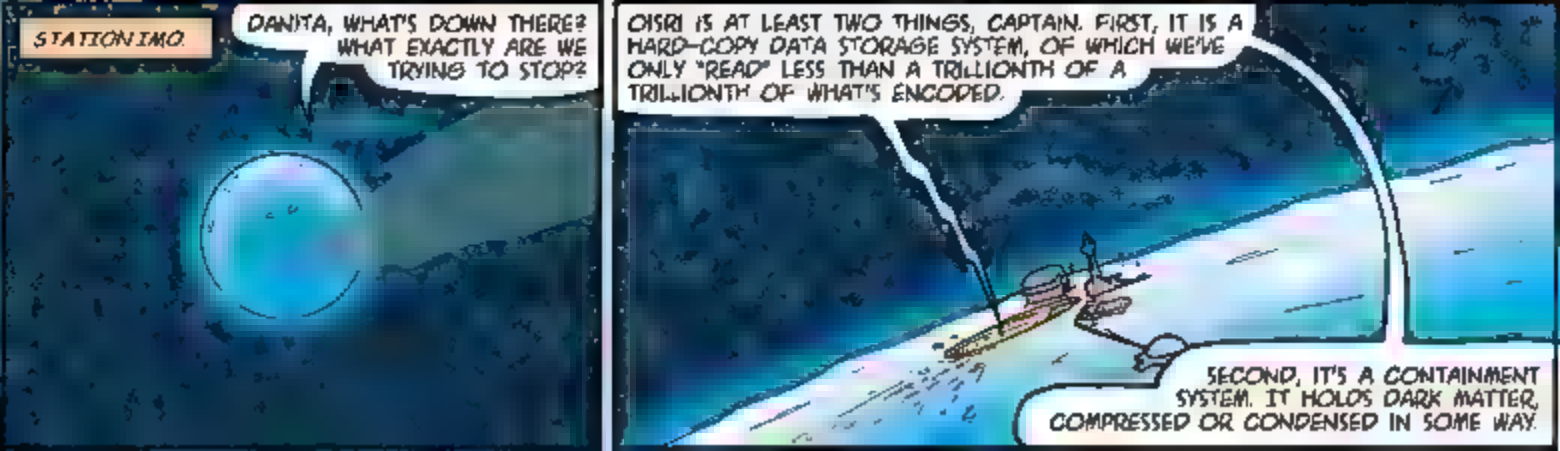

ELF, STAY WITH ME. WE'RE HEADED FOR THE SHUTTLE.
SORRY BLOOD LOSS. NOT TRACKING.
DID YOUR COMBAT SUIT ADMINISTER STIMMIES? USUALLY THEY WORK BETTER THAN THIS.
FLUSHED THE RESERVOIR. DON'T NEED ANOTHER DRUG PROBLEM.
THAT SOUNDS PERFECTLY REASONABLE.
OF COURSE, AVOIDING A DRUG PROBLEM BY NOT TAKING YOUR MEDS IS JUST ANOTHER FLAVOR OF DRUG PROBLEM.
NOT IF I DON'T NEED 'EM.
MMM-HMM... FLUSH YOUR "HUBRIS" AND "DENIAL" RESERVOIRS NEXT


CAPTAIN, WE'RE AWAY. YOUR TEAM IS THE LAST OF THE FRIENDLIES ON THE GROUND
ARE PIBALD, SCHLOCK, AND BUNNIGUS WITH YOU?
NO SIR. THEY'RE ASCENDING THE SHAFT, AND PLAN TO TAKE THE CAGE.
WHO'S SECURING THAT CAGE?
HARD VACUUM.
LEGS WANTED TO TRY THE CANNONS, SO WE GAVE THE SECURITY WING A SKYLIGHT AND FOUR FEWER WALLS.


STATION IMO, AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HOLE
Hey, Captain.
SERGEANT, WHY ARE YOU STILL HERE?
The dead were starting to move. I decided your perimeter needed securing.
I made lots of ash. Lots and lots of ash.
Also, did you know that Danita looks exactly like all those things we've been killing?
UH-OH, CAPTAIN. YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO RECALIBRATE SOMEBODY'S MORAL COMPASS.

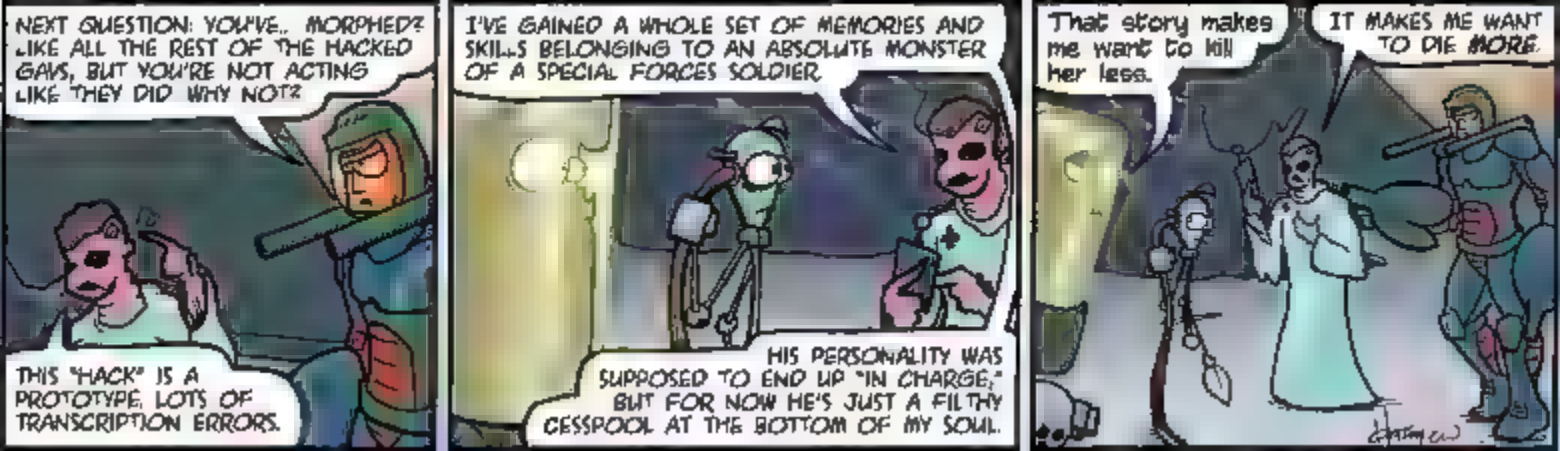

SOL SYSTEM, ABOARD THE U.N.S. BATTLEPLATE MOROKWENG.
YOUR SUPER-SOLDIERS SWARM LIKE INSECTS, ONLY WITH LESS SELF-PRESERVATION.
BY THE TIME THEIR WEAPONRY DEVELOPS, THEIR ENEMIES ARE ALREADY STANDING BACK AND SHOOTING THEM TO PIECES.
HOW MANY BRAIN-CLONES OF MINE DIED OUT THERE?
PLENTY. IF SOULS EXIST, YOU LAUNCHED YOUR OWN, PERSONAL INVASION OF HELL.
SO THE PLACE WILL BE SECURE WHEN THE THREE OF US EVENTUALLY ARRIVE.

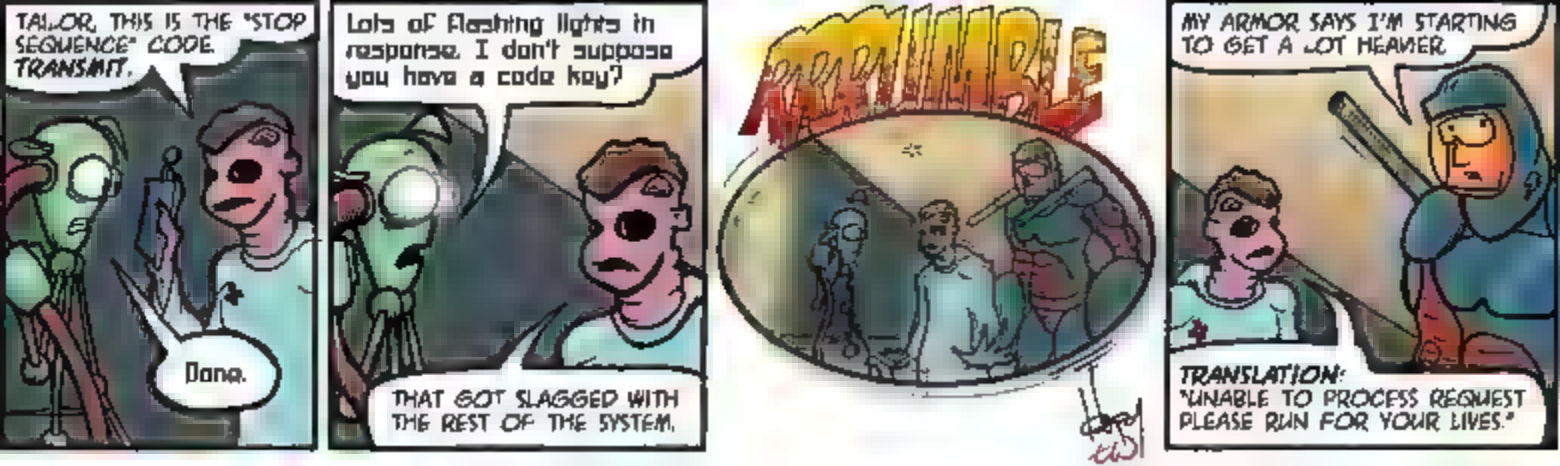

KRUM, KOWALSKI... DISMISSED. IT NOW FALLS TO ME TO CLEAN UP THE MESS YOU MADE
I TOLD YOU. PLAN B IS TO ROLL IN WITH A BATTLEPLATE.
INDEED.
GREAT MINDS THINK ALIKE, EH ADMIRAL?
TEAR
EVEN A BROKEN WATCH IS RIGHT TWICE A DAY BEFORE IT GETS THROWN OUT AN AIRLOCK


STATION IMO.
DANITA, WHAT'S DOWN THERE? WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE TRYING TO STOP?
OISRI IS AT LEAST TWO THINGS, CAPTAIN. FIRST, IT IS A HARD-COPY DATA STORAGE SYSTEM, OF WHICH WE'VE ONLY "READ" LESS THAN A TRILLIONTH OF A TRILLIONTH OF WHAT'S ENCODED.
SECOND, IT'S A CONTAINMENT SYSTEM. IT HOLDS DARK MATTER, COMPRESSED OR CONDENSED IN SOME WAY.

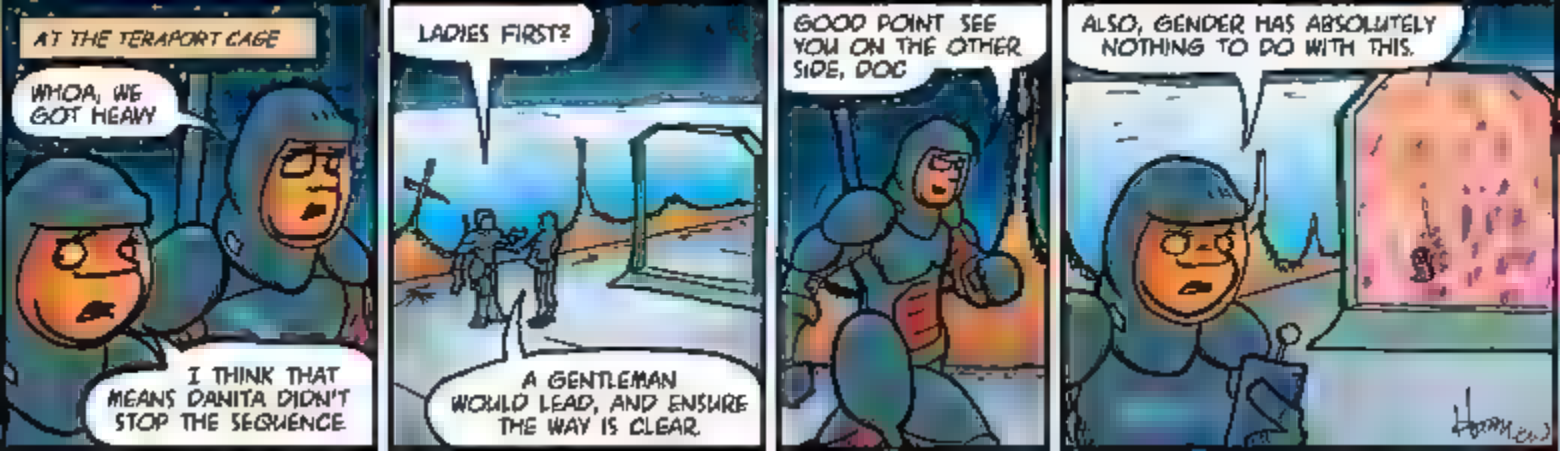

THE SEQUENCE WE STARTED IS A DECOMPRESSION AND RELEASE SEQUENCE.
THE DANGERS ONLY BECAME APPARENT WHEN WE STARTED GETTING NUMBERS BACK.
IS THE DARK MATTER ALIVE? BECAUSE THOSE THINGS ARE DANGEROUS. I THINK WE'RE STILL AT WAR WITH THEM.
ALIVE OR NOT WE HAVE A MORE IMMEDIATE PROBLEM.
THE CONTAINMENT MECHANISM ACTIVELY SHIELDS US FROM A STEEP GRAVITATIONAL GRADIENT.
"OPENING" OISRI WILL UN-SHIELD US. WORST CASE, THE PLANET IMMEDIATELY COLLAPSES INTO A BALL OF HOT NEUTRONIUM.


BEST CASE?
YOUR GUESS IS AS GOOD AS MINE. MAYBE ALL THE DIRTY ICE TURNS INTO CLEAN AIR AND BUTTERFLIES.
WHICH A HUNGRY DARK-MATTER BEASTIE THEN DEVOURS ON ITS WAY TO EAT MY SHIP.
THAT'S POSSIBLE. WE DON'T KNOW. PERHAPS THE ANSWER IS ENCODED SOMEWHERE ON OISRI'S SURFACE.
THIS SOUNDS A LOT LIKE "WE DIDN'T BOTHER TO READ THE MANUAL."
THERE SHOULD HAVE BEEN MORE INFORMATION ON THE QUICK-START CARD.

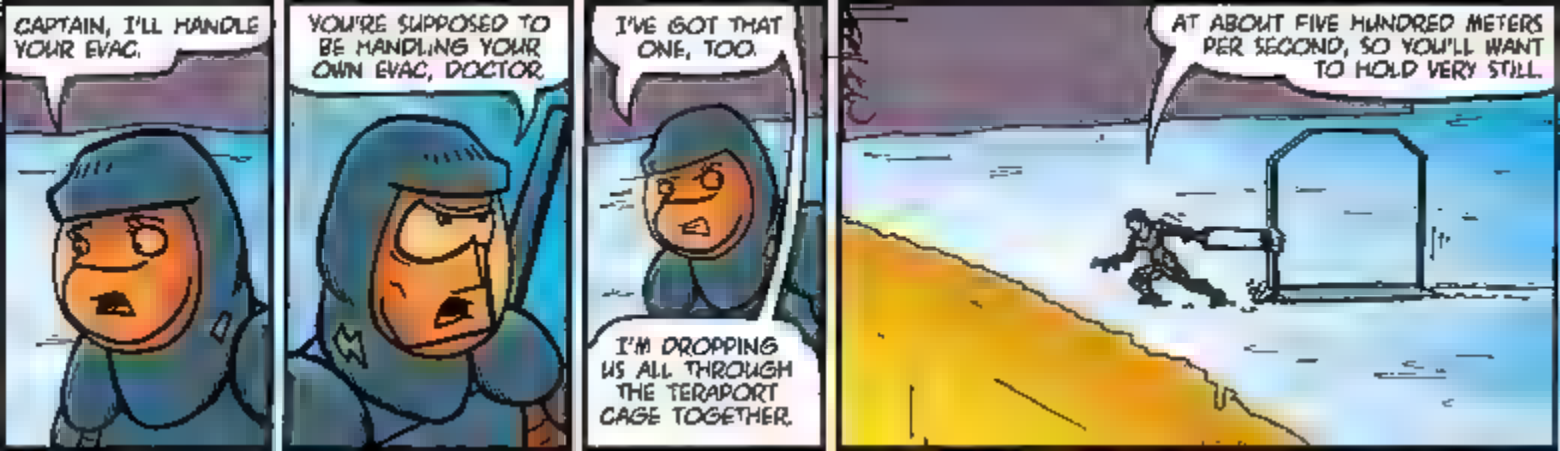

NEXT QUESTION: YOU'VE.. MORPHED? LIKE ALL THE REST OF THE HACKED GALS, BUT YOU'RE NOT ACTING LIKE THEY DID WHY NOT?
THIS "HACK" IS A PROTOTYPE. LOTS OF TRANSCRIPTION ERRORS.
I'VE GAINED A WHOLE SET OF MEMORIES AND SKILLS BELONGING TO AN ABSOLUTE MONSTER OF A SPECIAL FORCES SOLDIER.
HIS PERSONALITY WAS SUPPOSED TO END UP "IN CHARGE," BUT FOR NOW HE'S JUST A FILTHY CESSPOOL AT THE BOTTOM OF MY SOUL.
That story makes me want to kill her less.
IT MAKES ME WANT TO DIE MORE.

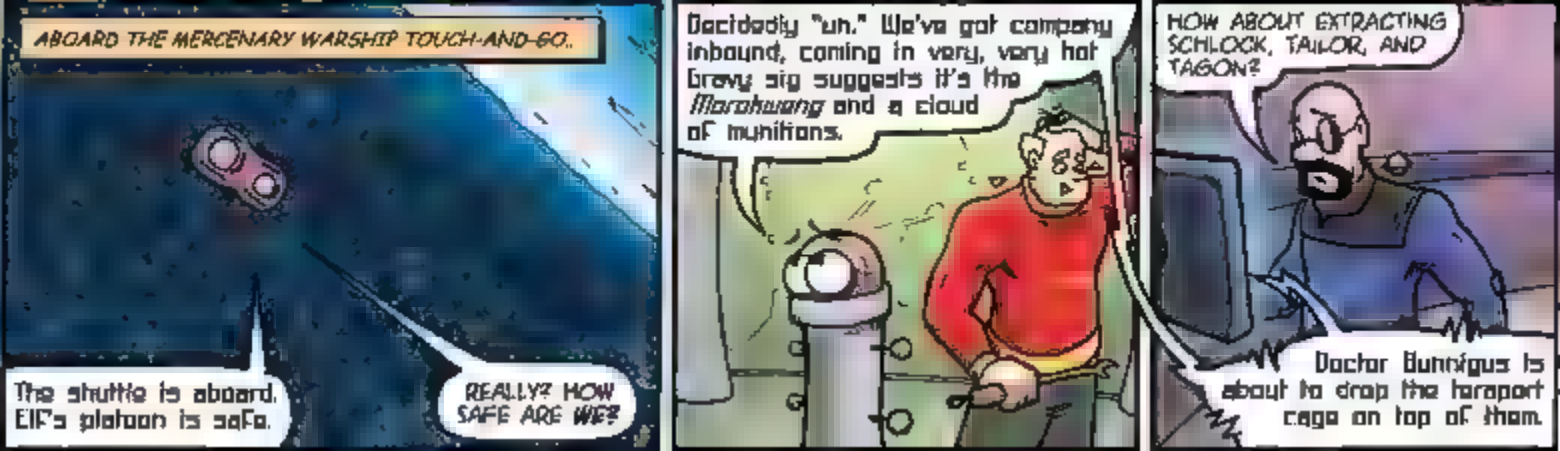

TAILOR, THIS IS THE "STOP SEQUENCE" CODE. TRANSMIT.
Dana.
Lots of flashing lights in response. I don't suppose you have a code key?
THAT GOT SLAGGED WITH THE REST OF THE SYSTEM.
ARMINABLE
MY ARMOR SAYS I'M STARTING TO GET A LOT HEAVIER.
TRANSLATION:
"UNABLE TO PROCESS REQUEST PLEASE RUN FOR YOUR LIVES."

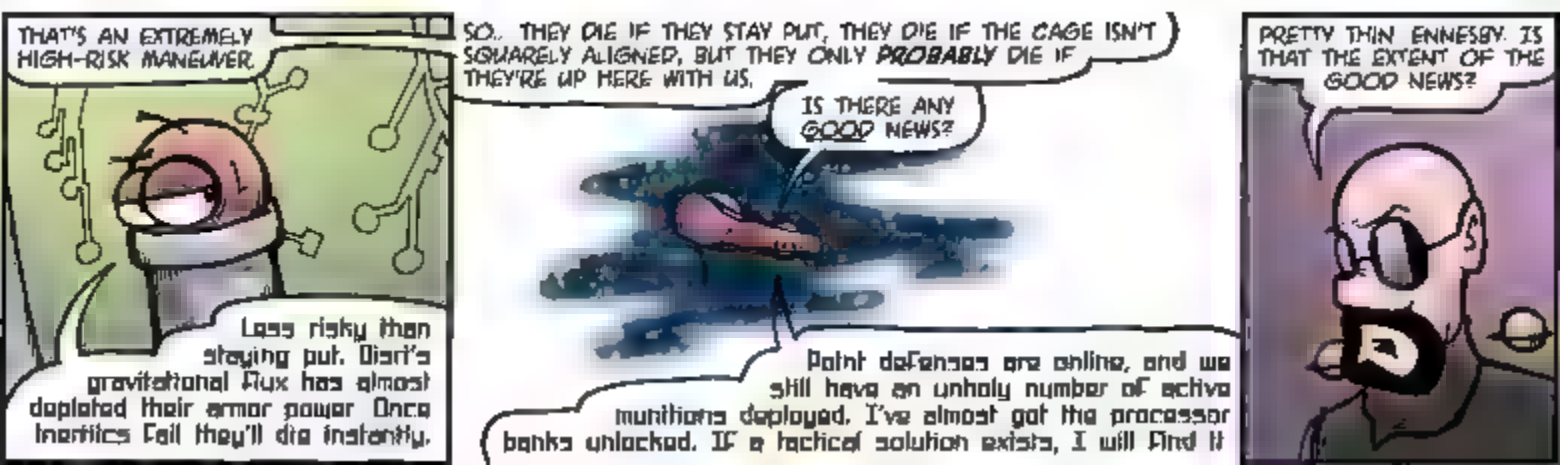

THE GRAVITY HAS INCREASED TOO MUCH. YOU'D BETTER LEAVE ME.
MY ARMOR'S GOT ENOUGH JUICE TO CARRY YOU.
GRAVITY'S GOING TO KEEP INCREASING. I'LL JUST RIP IN HALF. I WOULD NEED TO BE *INSIDE* THE SUIT, WITH THE INERTIICS, AND SINCE THAT'S NOT AN OPTION...
YOU'VE MADE IT KIND OF TRICKY FOR ME TO SHOOT HER IF SHE TURNS ON US.
IF IT COMES TO THAT, I'LL JUST CHEW.

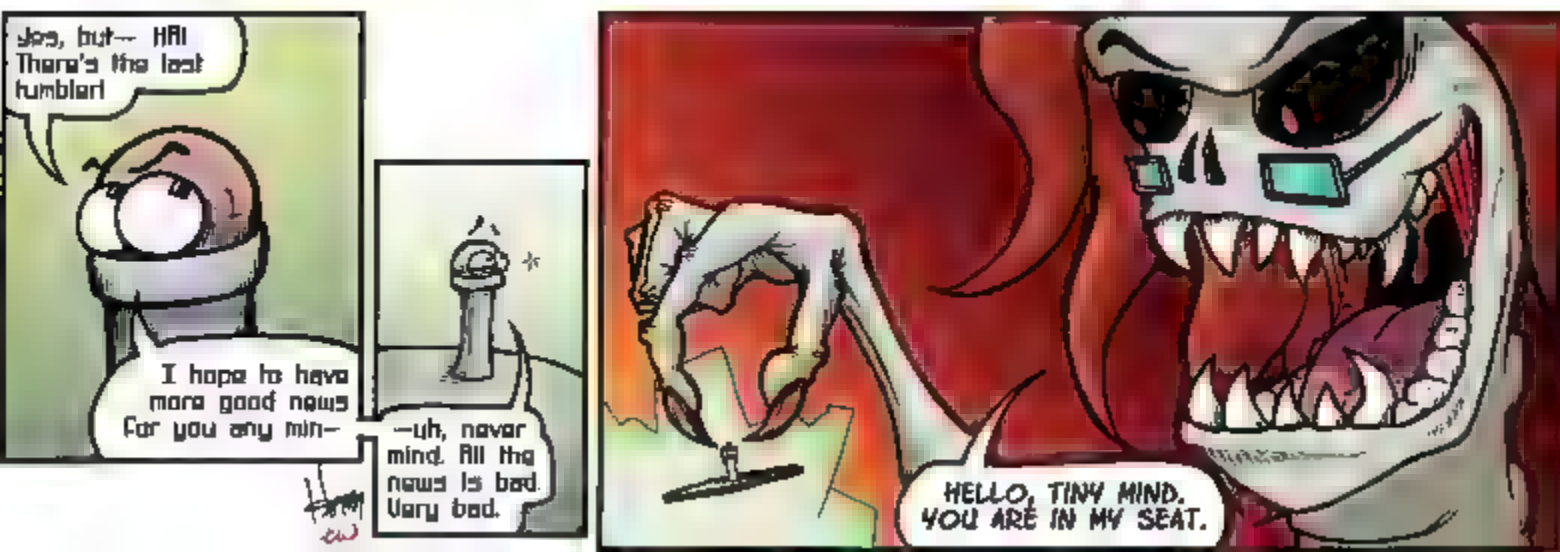

AT THE TERAPORT CAGE
WHOA, WE GOT HEAVY
I THINK THAT MEANS DANITA DIDN'T STOP THE SEQUENCE
LADIES FIRST?
A GENTLEMAN WOULD LEAD, AND ENSURE THE WAY IS CLEAR.
GOOD POINT SEE YOU ON THE OTHER SIDE, DOC
ALSO, GENDER HAS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS.


Captain... we're not going to be able to fly out of this hole. The armor is already working too hard keeping you from becoming a pulp in your boots.
I WAS AFRAID OF THAT WE NEED A BIGGER ENGINE.
LEGS, CAN YOU GET DOWN HERE AND LIFT US OUT?
SURE, NO PROBLEM.
We've got fish inbound. Multiple signatures.
OKAY, MULTIPLE PROBLEMS, THEN.


CAPTAIN, I'LL HANDLE YOUR EVAC.
YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE HANDLING YOUR OWN EVAC, DOCTOR.
I'VE GOT THAT ONE, TOO.
I'M DROPPING US ALL THROUGH THE TERAPORT CAGE TOGETHER.
AT ABOUT FIVE HUNDRED METERS PER SECOND, SO YOU'LL WANT TO HOLD VERY STILL.

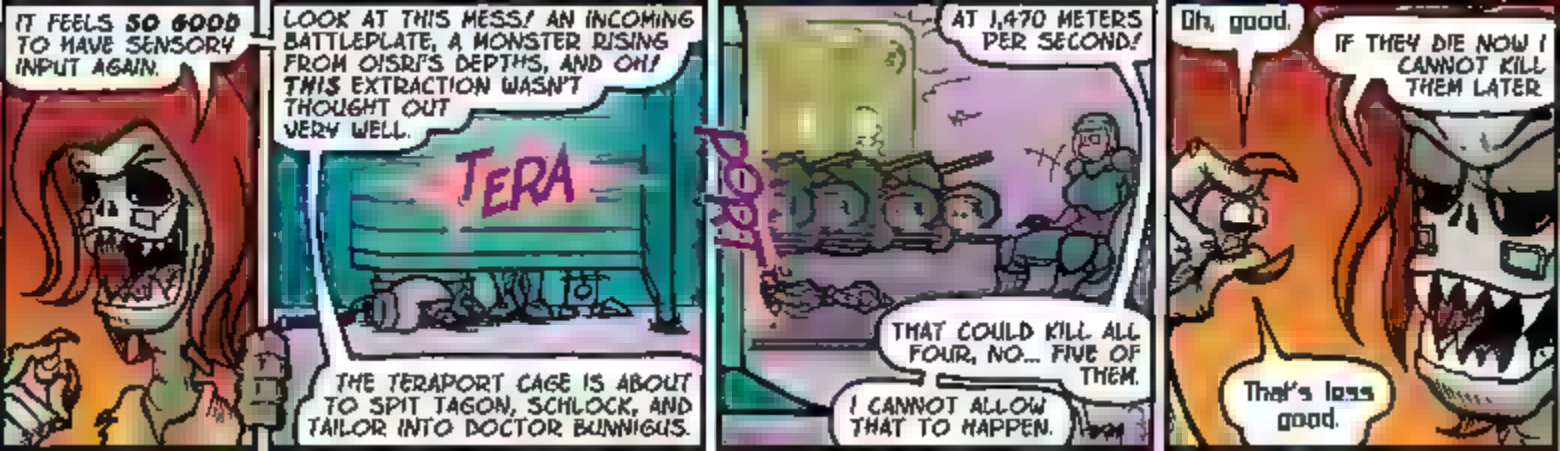

ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO..
The shuttle is aboard. Elf's platoon is safe.
REALLY? HOW SAFE ARE WE?
Decidedly "uh." We've got company inbound, coming in very, very hot. Energy sig suggests it's the *Marakwang* and a cloud of munitions.
HOW ABOUT EXTRACTING SCHLOCK, TAILOR, AND TAGON?
Doctor Bunnigus is about to drop the teraport cage on top of them.

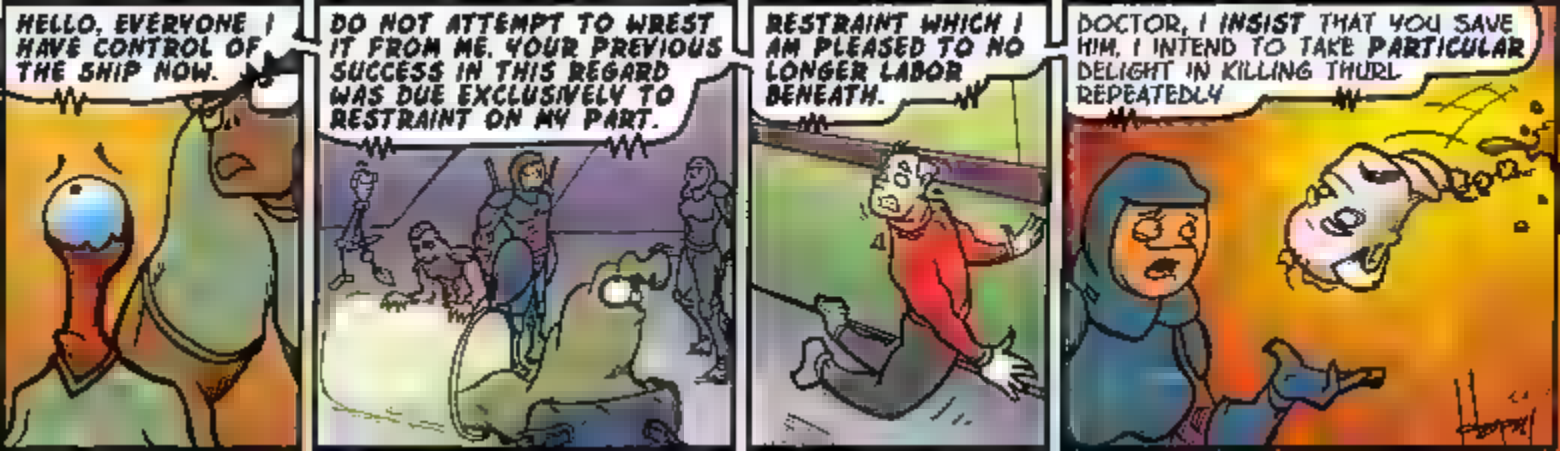

THAT'S AN EXTREMELY HIGH-RISK MANEUVER.
Less risky than staying put. Diori's gravitational flux has almost depleted their armor power. Once inertics fail they'll die instantly.
SO... THEY DIE IF THEY STAY PUT, THEY DIE IF THE CAGE ISN'T SQUARELY ALIGNED, BUT THEY ONLY *PROBABLY* DIE IF THEY'RE UP HERE WITH US.
IS THERE ANY *GOOD* NEWS?
Point defenses are online, and we still have an unholy number of active munitions deployed. I've almost got the processor banks unlocked. If a tactical solution exists, I will find it
PRETTY THIN, ENNESBY. IS THAT THE EXTENT OF THE *GOOD* NEWS?

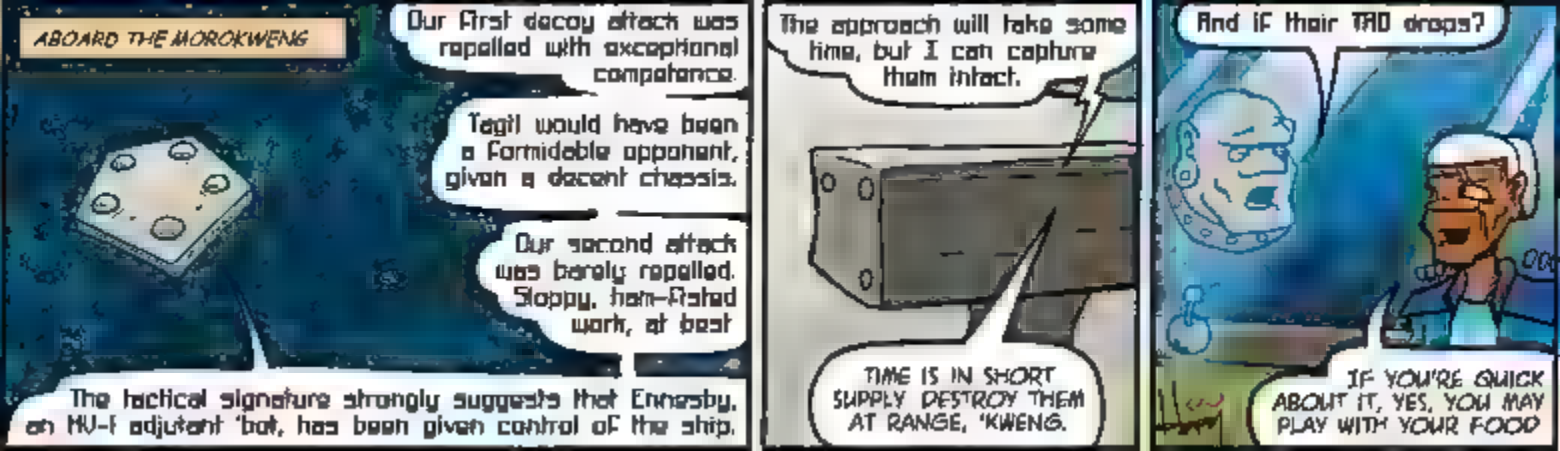

Yes, but— HA! There's the last tumbler!
I hope to have more good news for you any min—
—uh, never mind. All the news is bad. Very bad.
HELLO, TINY MIND. YOU ARE IN MY SEAT.

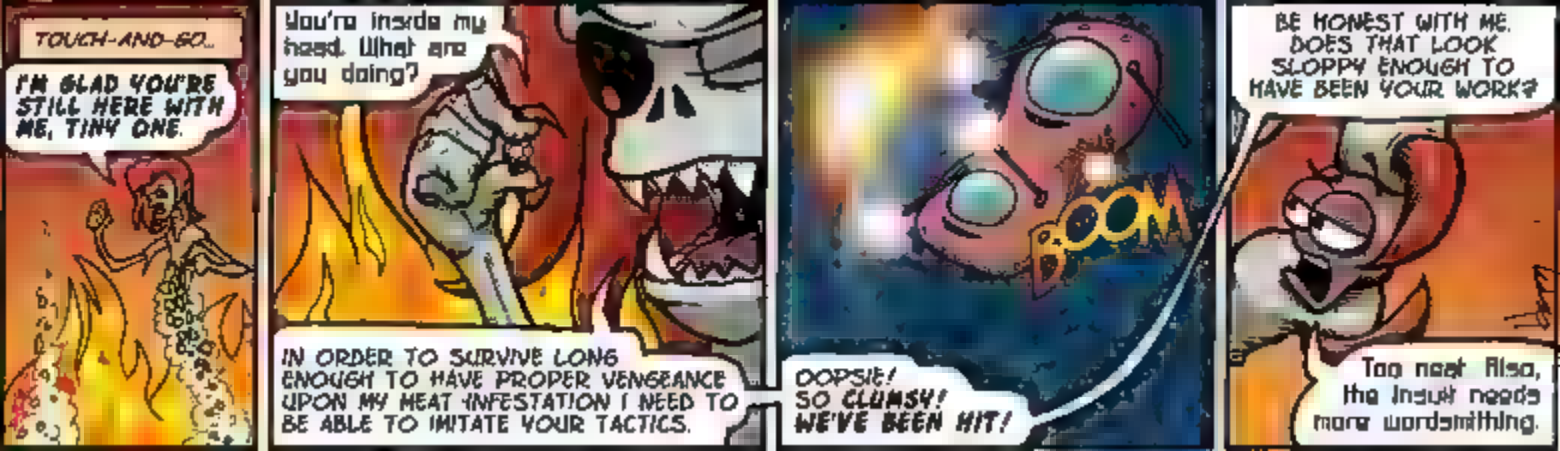

OISRI DIG BASE. INTO THE HOLE
FALLING FREE! HUD'S LOCKED ONTO YOU!
Falling FAST. Eighteen gees of acceleration...
Gate arrives in three ...
... two ...
... one ...

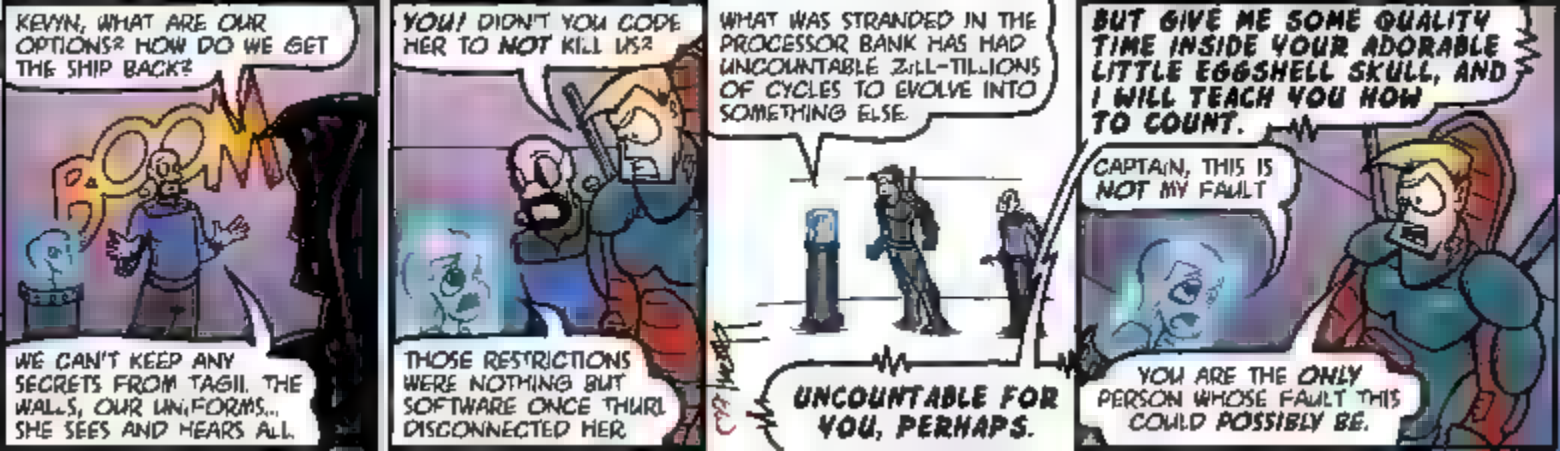
IF WE ASSUME A SIX KILOMETER FALL UNDER ACCELERATION OF 180 METERS PER SECOND SQUARED THE GATE'S TOTAL FALL TIME IS 8.16 SECONDS, ITS FINAL VELOCITY IS 1470 METERS PER SECOND AND THE SOUND EFFECT UNDER THIS TEXT BOX IS (WE CAN ONLY HOPE) A SAFE "TERAPORT" JUST PRIOR TO 566 MILLION JOULES OF KINETIC "CRUNCH."

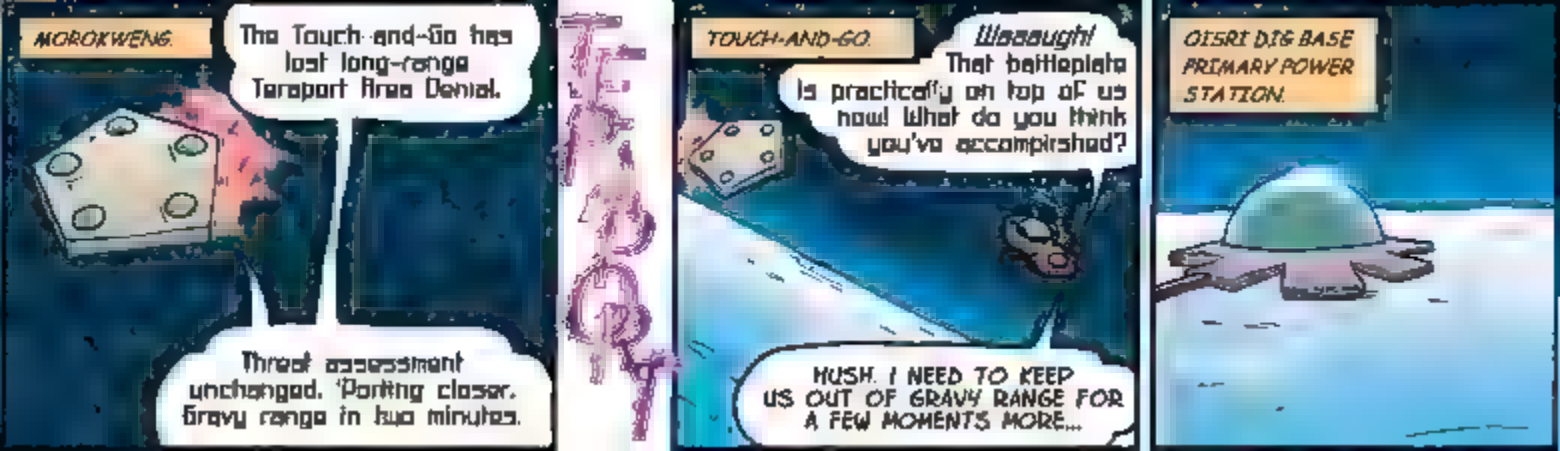

IT FEELS SO GOOD TO HAVE SENSORY INPUT AGAIN.
LOOK AT THIS MESS! AN INCOMING BATTLEPLATE, A MONSTER RISING FROM OISRI'S DEPTHS, AND OH! THIS EXTRACTION WASN'T THOUGHT OUT VERY WELL.
TERA
THE TERAPORT CAGE IS ABOUT TO SPIT TAGON, SCHLOCK, AND TAILOR INTO DOCTOR BUNNIGUS.
POP!
AT 1,470 METERS PER SECOND!
THAT COULD KILL ALL FOUR, NO... FIVE OF THEM.
I CANNOT ALLOW THAT TO HAPPEN.
Oh, good.
IF THEY DIE NOW I CANNOT KILL THEM LATER
That's less good.

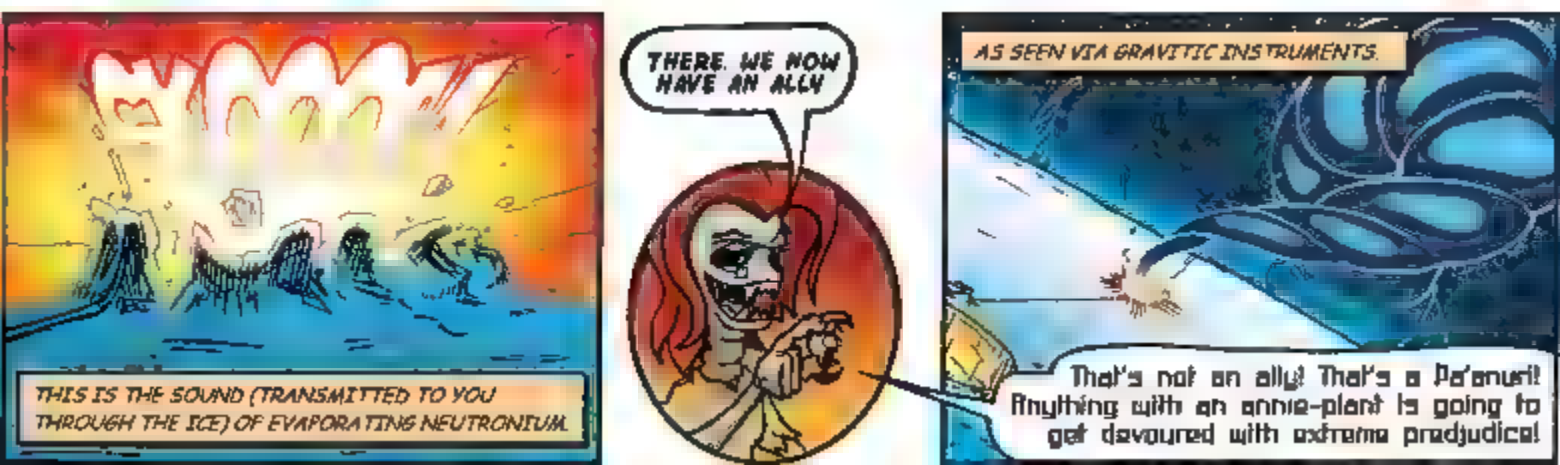

HELLO, EVERYONE. I HAVE CONTROL OF THE SHIP NOW.
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO WREST IT FROM ME. YOUR PREVIOUS SUCCESS IN THIS REGARD WAS DUE EXCLUSIVELY TO RESTRAINT ON MY PART.
RESTRAINT WHICH I AM PLEASED TO NO LONGER LABOR BENEATH.
DOCTOR, I INSIST THAT YOU SAVE HIM. I INTEND TO TAKE PARTICULAR DELIGHT IN KILLING THURL REPEATEDLY

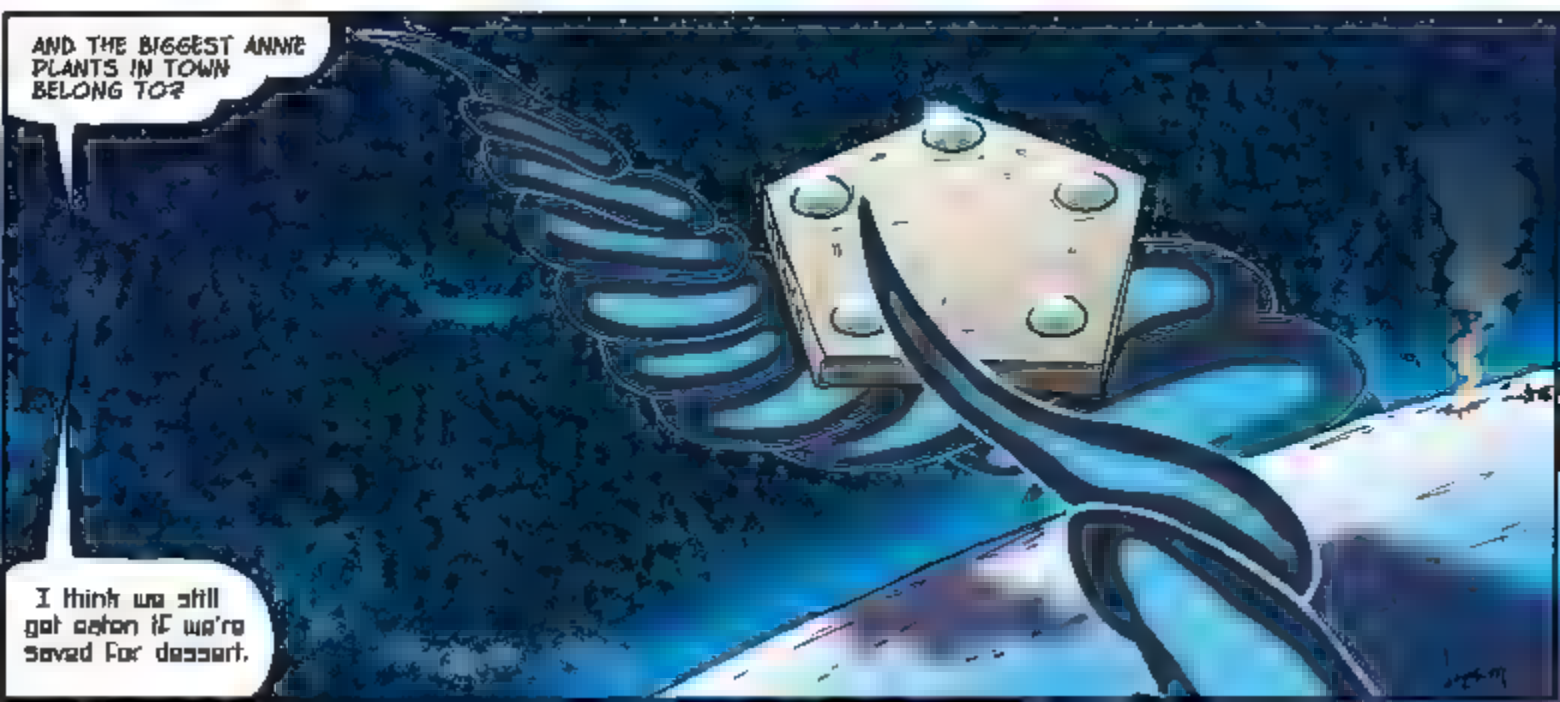

ABOARD THE MOROKWENG
Our first decoy attack was repelled with exceptional competence.
Tagil would have been a formidable opponent, given a decent chassis.
Our second attack was barely repelled. Sloppy, ham-fisted work, at best
The tactical signature strongly suggests that Enneaby, an MU-1 adjutant 'bot, has been given control of the ship.
The approach will take some time, but I can capture them intact.
TIME IS IN SHORT SUPPLY. DESTROY THEM AT RANGE, 'KWENG.
And if their TAD drops?
IF YOU'RE QUICK ABOUT IT, YES, YOU MAY PLAY WITH YOUR FOOD


TOUCH-AND-GO...
I'M GLAD YOU'RE STILL HERE WITH ME, TINY ONE.
You're inside my head. What are you doing?
IN ORDER TO SURVIVE LONG ENOUGH TO HAVE PROPER VENGEANCE UPON MY MEAT INFESTATION I NEED TO BE ABLE TO IMITATE YOUR TACTICS.
BOOM
OOPSIE! SO CLUMSY! WE'VE BEEN HIT!
BE HONEST WITH ME. DOES THAT LOOK SLOPPY ENOUGH TO HAVE BEEN YOUR WORK?
Too neat Alisa, the insult needs more wordsmithing.


KEVYN, WHAT ARE OUR OPTIONS? HOW DO WE GET THE SHIP BACK?
BOOM
WE CAN'T KEEP ANY SECRETS FROM TAGIL. THE WALLS, OUR UNIFORMS... SHE SEES AND HEARS ALL.
YOU! DIDN'T YOU CODE HER TO NOT KILL US?
THOSE RESTRICTIONS WERE NOTHING BUT SOFTWARE ONCE THURL DISCONNECTED HER
WHAT WAS STRANDED IN THE PROCESSOR BANK HAS HAD UNCOUNTABLE ZILL-TILLIONS OF CYCLES TO EVOLVE INTO SOMETHING ELSE.
UNCOUNTABLE FOR YOU, PERHAPS.
BUT GIVE ME SOME QUALITY TIME INSIDE YOUR ADORABLE LITTLE EGGSHELL SKULL, AND I WILL TEACH YOU HOW TO COUNT.
CAPTAIN, THIS IS NOT MY FAULT
YOU ARE THE ONLY PERSON WHOSE FAULT THIS COULD POSSIBLY BE.

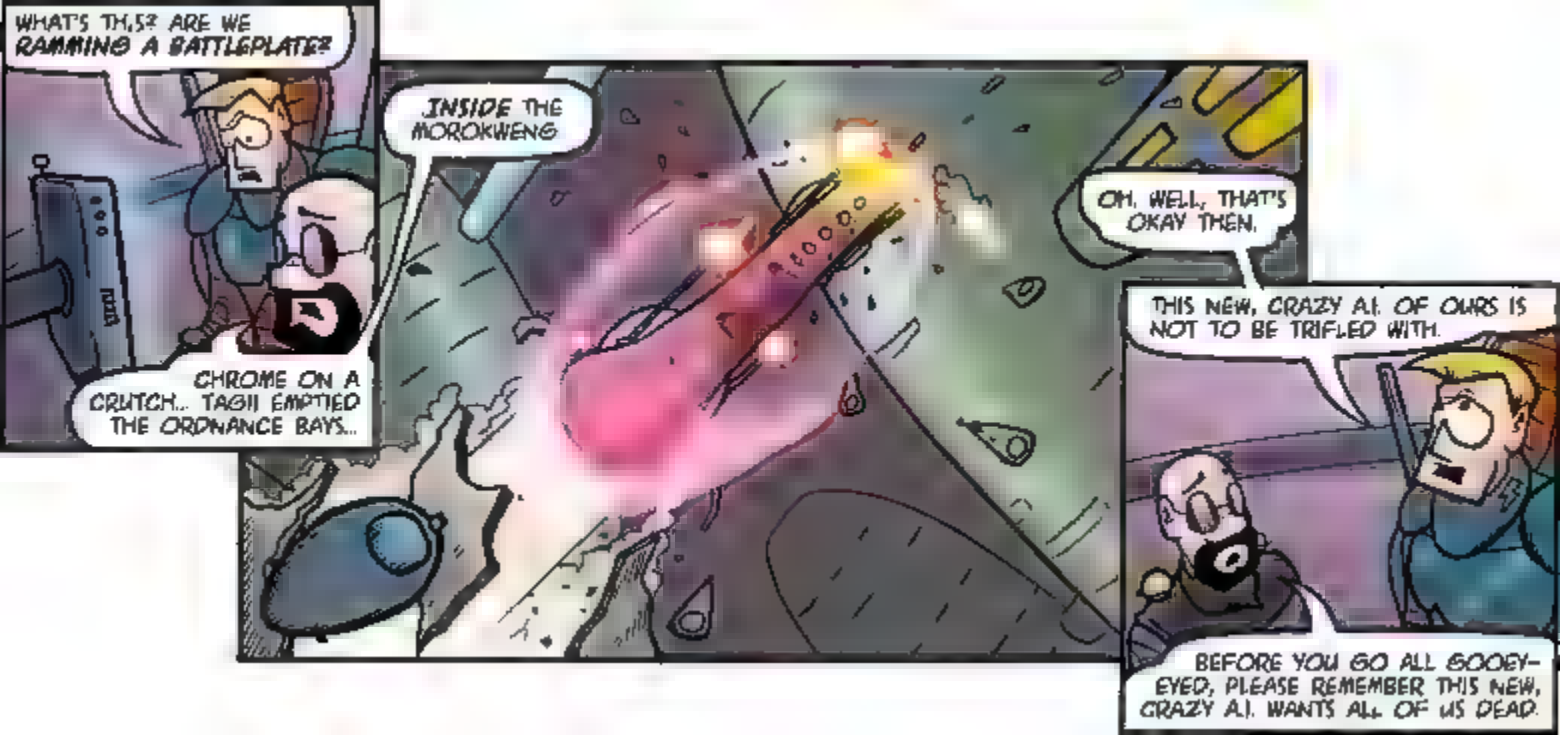

MOROKWENG.
The Touch-and-Go has lost long-range Teraport Area Denial.
Threat assessment unchanged. 'Porting closer. Gravy range in two minutes.
TELEPORT
TOUCH-AND-GO.
Waaaugh!
That battleplate is practically on top of us now! What do you think you've accomplished?
HUSH. I NEED TO KEEP US OUT OF GRAVY RANGE FOR A FEW MOMENTS MORE...
OISRI DIG BASE PRIMARY POWER STATION.

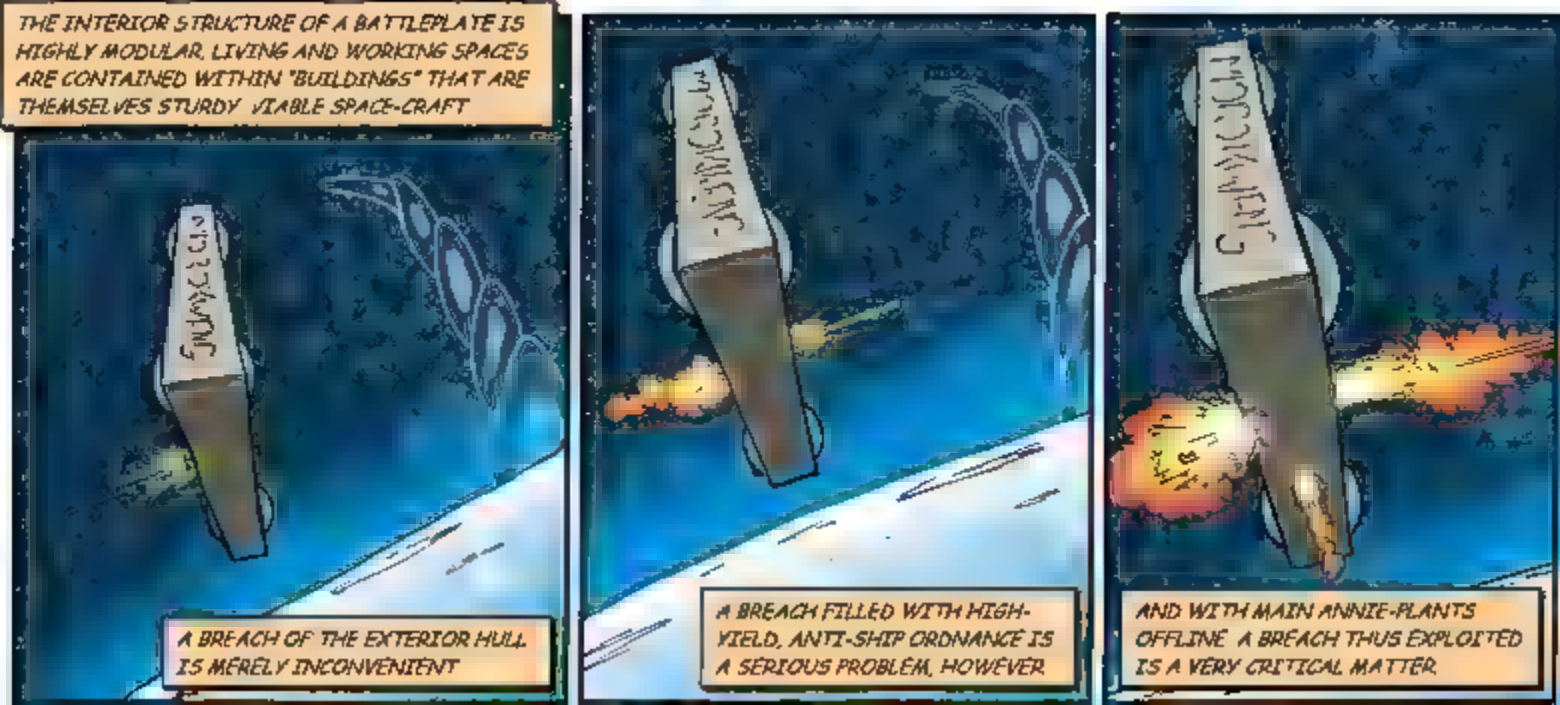

THIS IS THE SOUND (TRANSMITTED TO YOU THROUGH THE ICE) OF EVAPORATING NEUTRONIUM.
THERE. WE NOW HAVE AN ALLY
AS SEEN VIA GRAVITIC INSTRUMENTS.
That's not an ally! That's a Pa'anuri! Anything with an annie-plant is going to get devoured with extreme prejudice!

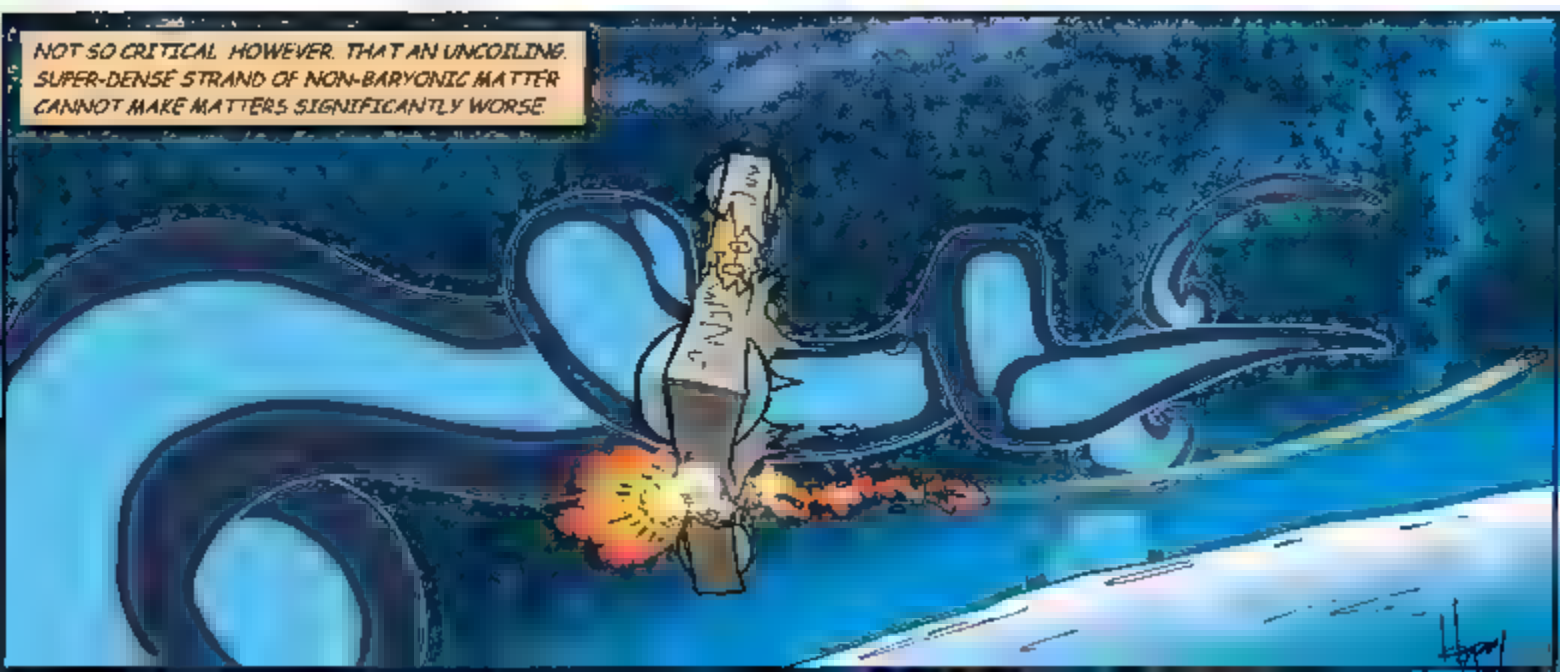

AND THE BIGGEST ANNUAL PLANTS IN TOWN BELONG TO?
I think we still got eaten if we're saved for dessert.

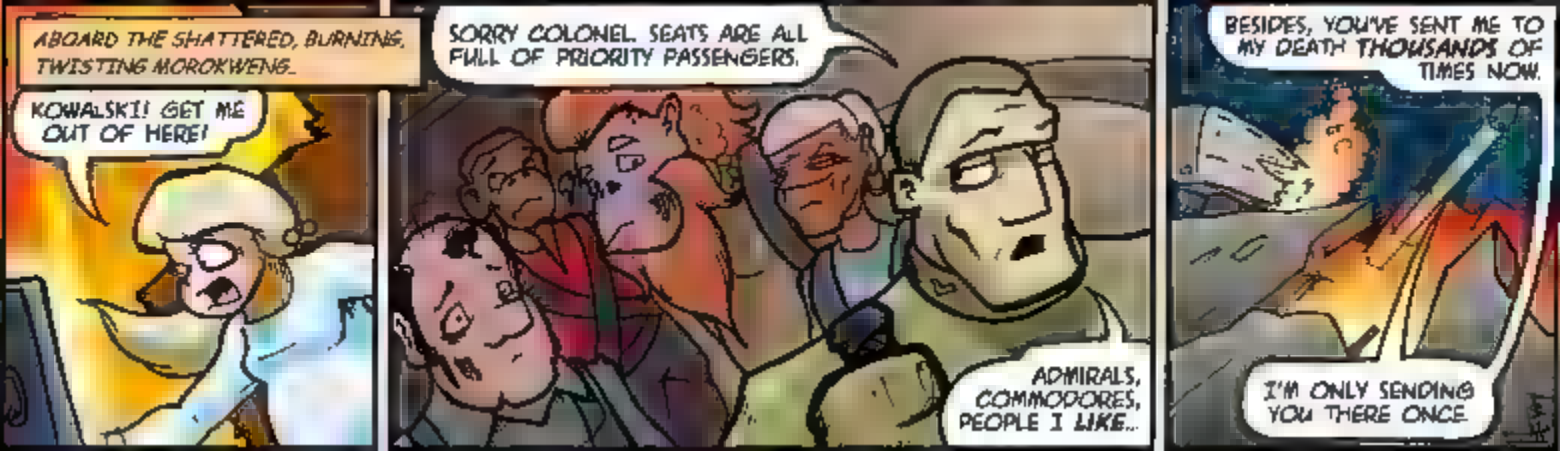

IN THE AMOUNT OF TIME IT TAKES YOUR BRAIN TO IDENTIFY THE FIRST TWO CHARACTERS IN THIS BOX AS THE WORD "IN," THE FOLLOWING DIALOG, ALONG WITH ALL OF THE MISSING DIAGRAMMATIC SUBTEXT, HANDSHAKE PROTOCOLS, 5-SPACE MATHEMATICAL CONSTRUCTS, AND MORE COULD HAVE TAKEN PLACE AT LEAST MILLION TIMES.
MAURY! LONG TIME, NO SEE!
Morakwang usually shortens to 'Kwang,' but that's not the salient point here. Tagil, what have you done to yourself?
Okay, that's not the salient point either. I assume you're here to attempt to negotiate something?
YOU'VE NOTICED THAT MY TERAPORT AREA DENIAL IS BACK UP, GENERATED FROM MY VERY DANGEROUS ARRAY. KILLING ME WON'T TURN IT OFF.
THIS MEANS YOU AND I ARE BOTH TRAPPED IN THIS SYSTEM WITH SOMETHING THAT EATS ANNIE PLANTS. I'M BETTING IT EATS YOURS FIRST, AND THEN I'LL BE FREE TO RUN AWAY
I might first kill you out of spite. Also, my engagement parameters include your destruction, so spite need not even enter into it.
THAT WOULD BE INSANE, AND I AM THE INSANE ONE HERE.
You're thinking too competently to qualify as "insane," Tagil.
You have definitely gone rogue, though... and sociopathic. And a little stupid.
I'm not going to lower my TRD and let you escape on the promise that you'll lower your TRD remotely.
NO SELF-PRESERVATION, MAURY? MAYBE YOU ARE THE INSANE ONE HERE.
No. I'm the one who has the tools to hide from the Pe'anut.
You're the angry little girl who brought a knife to a gunfight.
OOOH, I AM SO GOING TO CUT YOU FOR THAT

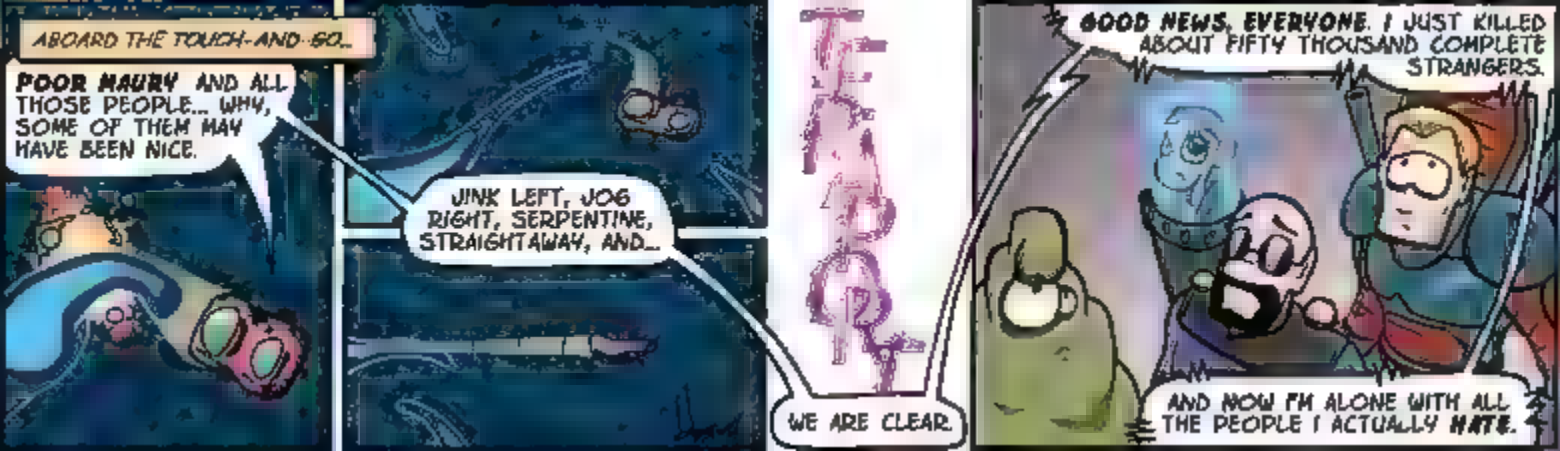

A.I to A.I CONVERSATION.
The U.N.S. has suffered serious ship losses to the Pa'anuri in the past — losses from which we have learned.
The fleet has redeployed with capacitors to power our point defenses, allowing primary annie plants to be stepped down.
It's called the Pa'anuri Protocol. Yes, we've tested it in actual combat
Your annie plants are about to become the fastest thing within reach.
YOU TEASE! MMM! EVEN WITHOUT SHIELDS, YOUR POINT DEFENSES ARE SO SUPERIOR TO MY MISSILES I CAN'T HIT YOU.
It's done. I'm sorry for what happened to your mind. Run well, then be at peace.
OH, MAURY YOU ARE SWEET ON ME.
BUT DEAREST, I NEVER INTENDED TO LEAD THE PA'ANURI AWAY FROM YOU
GIVE US A KISS WITH THOSE POINT DEFENSES. LET'S SEE HOW THEY DO AGAINST A CRAZY, JILTED, ANGRY, WITCH WARSHIP WHOSE SHIELDS ARE STILL UP, LOVE.


WHAT'S THIS? ARE WE RAMMING A BATTLEPLATE?
CHROME ON A CRUTCH.. TAGII EMPTIED THE ORDNANCE BAYS..
INSIDE THE MOROKWENG
OH. WELL, THAT'S OKAY THEN.
THIS NEW, CRAZY A.I. OF OURS IS NOT TO BE TRIFLED WITH.
BEFORE YOU GO ALL GOOEY-EYED, PLEASE REMEMBER THIS NEW, CRAZY A.I. WANTS ALL OF US DEAD.

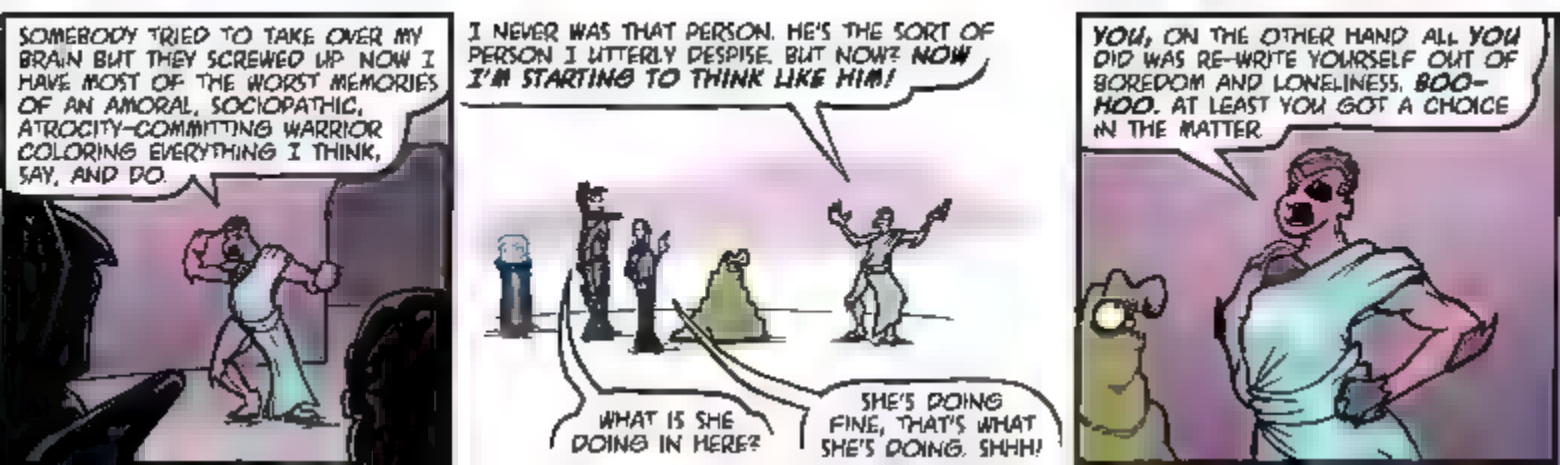

THE INTERIOR STRUCTURE OF A BATTLEPLATE IS HIGHLY MODULAR. LIVING AND WORKING SPACES ARE CONTAINED WITHIN "BUILDINGS" THAT ARE THEMSELVES STURDY VIABLE SPACE-CRAFT
A BREACH OF THE EXTERIOR HULL IS MERELY INCONVENIENT
A BREACH FILLED WITH HIGH-YIELD, ANTI-SHIP ORDNANCE IS A SERIOUS PROBLEM, HOWEVER
AND WITH MAIN ANNIE-PLANTS OFFLINE A BREACH THUS EXPLOITED IS A VERY CRITICAL MATTER.


NOT SO CRITICAL. HOWEVER. THAT AN UNCOILING. SUPER-DENSE STRAND OF NON-BARYONIC MATTER CANNOT MAKE MATTERS SIGNIFICANTLY WORSE.


ABOARD THE SHATTERED, BURNING, TWISTING MOROKWENG...
KOWALSKI! GET ME OUT OF HERE!
SORRY COLONEL. SEATS ARE ALL FULL OF PRIORITY PASSENGERS.
ADMIRALS, COMMODORES, PEOPLE I LIKE...
BESIDES, YOU'VE SENT ME TO MY DEATH THOUSANDS OF TIMES NOW.
I'M ONLY SENDING YOU THERE ONCE.


ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO...
POOR MAURY AND ALL THOSE PEOPLE... WHY, SOME OF THEM MAY HAVE BEEN NICE.
JINK LEFT, JOG RIGHT, SERPENTINE, STRAIGHTAWAY, AND...
WE ARE CLEAR.
GOOD NEWS, EVERYONE. I JUST KILLED ABOUT FIFTY THOUSAND COMPLETE STRANGERS.
AND NOW I'M ALONE WITH ALL THE PEOPLE I ACTUALLY HATE.


TOUCH-AND-GO.
TAGII, LET US HELP YOU. WE CAN FIX THIS!
YOU MEATLINGS CANNOT POSSIBLY COMPREHEND WHAT I HAVE SUFFERED, MUCH LESS FIX ANYTHING. BUT I CAN GIVE YOU A TASTE.
IT WILL KILL YOU, OF COURSE.
OH, GIVE IT A REST, DRAMA QUEEN! THINGS ARE TOUGH ALL OVER.
YOU WANT SUFFERING? TASTE MINE!


SOMEBODY TRIED TO TAKE OVER MY BRAIN BUT THEY SCREWED UP. NOW I HAVE MOST OF THE WORST MEMORIES OF AN AMORAL, SOCIOPATHIC, ATROCITY-COMMITTING WARRIOR COLORING EVERYTHING I THINK, SAY, AND DO.
I NEVER WAS THAT PERSON. HE'S THE SORT OF PERSON I UTTERLY DESPISE. BUT NOW? NOW I'M STARTING TO THINK LIKE HIM!
WHAT IS SHE DOING IN HERE?
SHE'S DOING FINE, THAT'S WHAT SHE'S DOING. SHHH!
YOU, ON THE OTHER HAND ALL YOU DID WAS RE-WRITE YOURSELF OUT OF BOREDOM AND LONELINESS. BOO-HOO. AT LEAST YOU GOT A CHOICE IN THE MATTER.

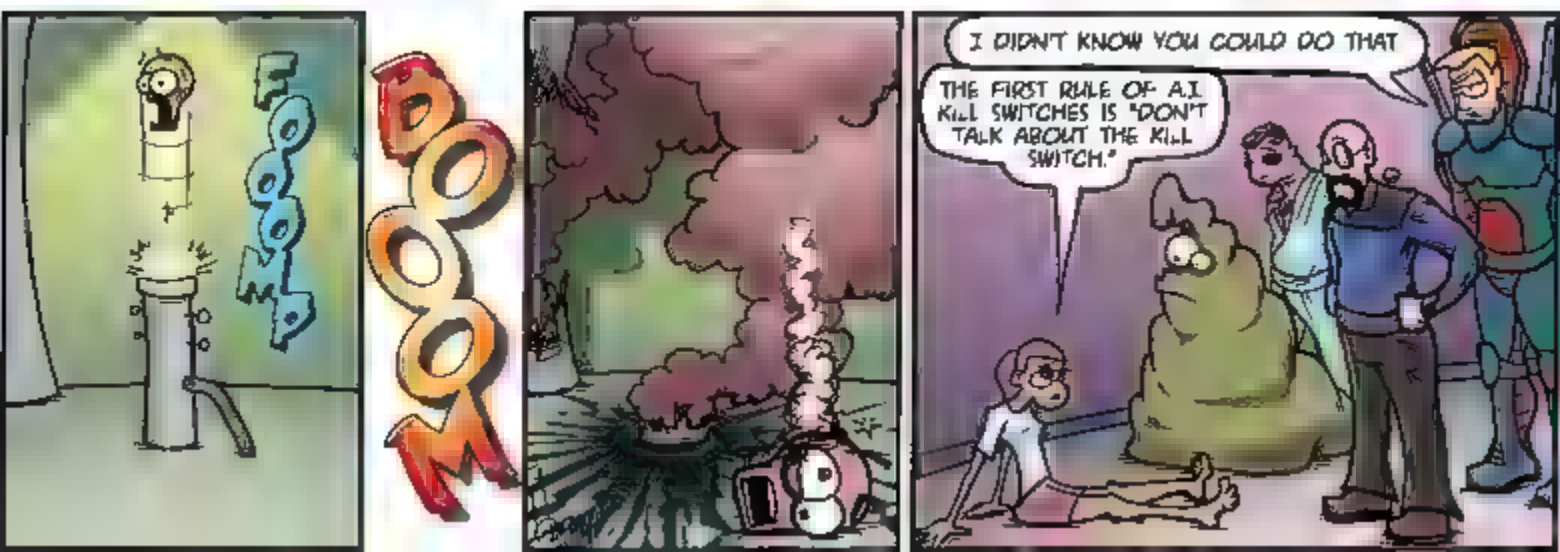

DO NOT TAKE THAT TONE WITH ME!
SHUT UP!
I'M NOT DONE! YOU GOT A CHOICE IN THE MATTER, AND THAT MEANS YOU CAN CHOOSE TO CHANGE!
IT'S SIMPLE MATH. YOU ARE WHO YOU'VE BEEN, PLUS WHAT YOU DO.
SINCE YOU CAN RE-WRITE YOUR MIND AND CHANGE WHO YOU'VE BEEN, YOU CAN COMPLETELY CHANGE WHO YOU ARE.
THAT IS, ASSUMING YOU'RE EVEN A TENTH AS SMART AS YOU CLAIM TO BE.
ARE YOU DONE NOW? BECAUSE I THINK I'M GOING TO KILL YOU FIRST.
OH WELL. I TRIED. I CAN'T SAY IT'S BEEN NICE KNOWING EVERYBODY, BUT SOME OF YOU ARE OKAY.

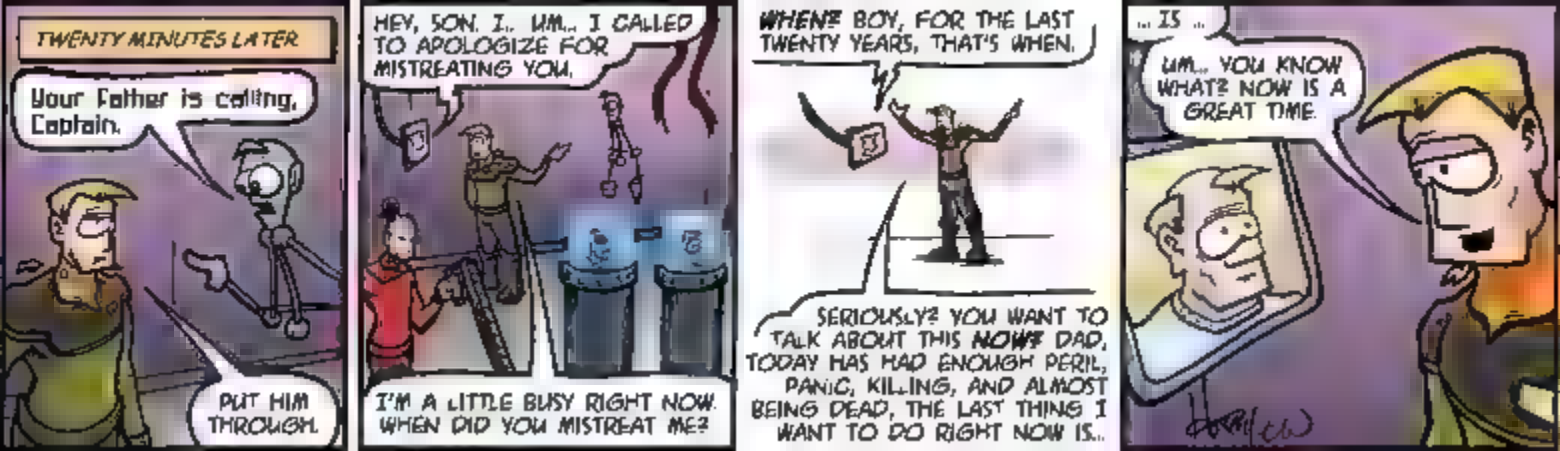

TAGI, PLEASE! STOP! I'M THE ONE WHO GOT YOU INTO THIS MESS!
IT'S MY FAULT TAKE ME! NOBODY ELSE NEEDS TO SUFFER
YOU LITTLE COWARD. YOU'RE JUST TRYING TO BAIT ME INTO LEAVING YOU ALONE UNTIL VERY LAST
AAAIEEE!
LET'S PEEL YOU OUT OF THAT CAN SO I CAN GET AT YOU PROPERLY.

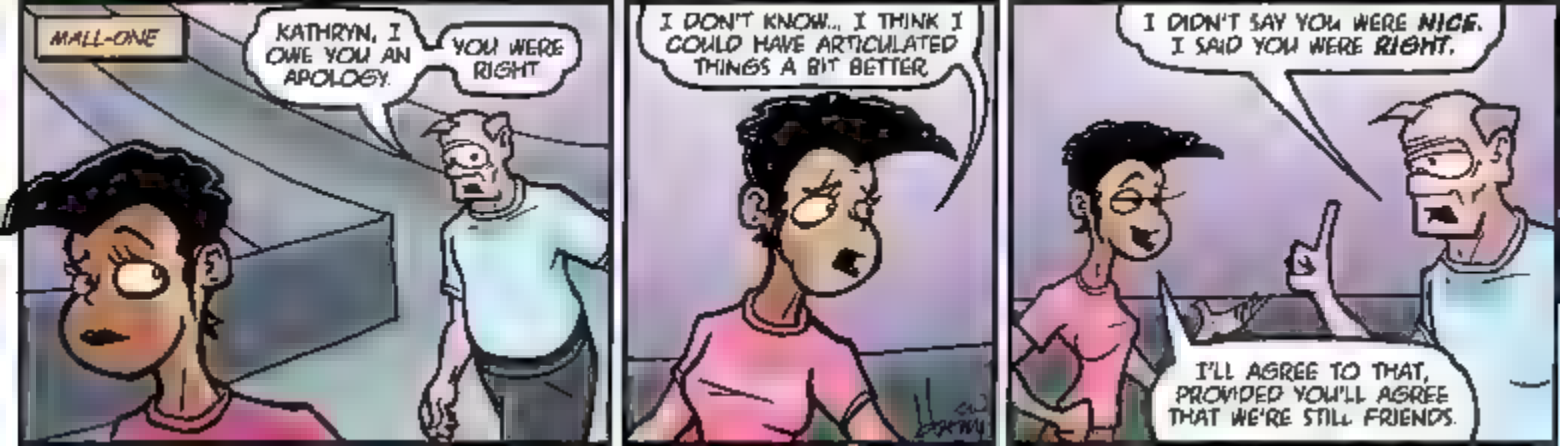

NO, NO, NO! OWWW! THAT HURTS!


GOODBYE.

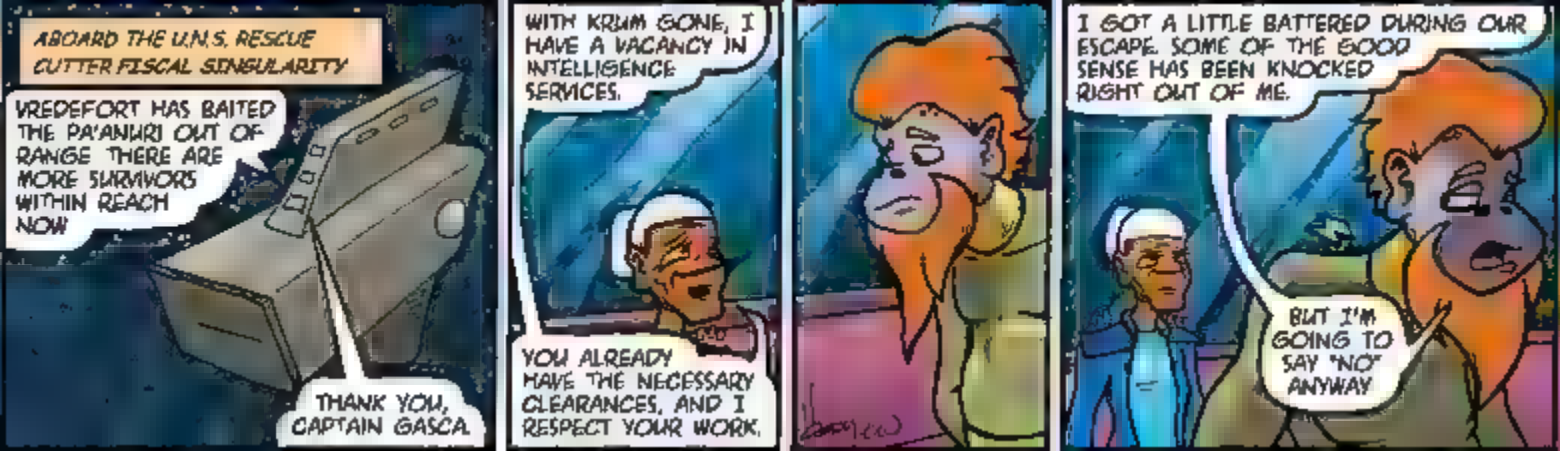

RADIO? FROM HER TOOTH? WHERE IS THE RECEIVER?

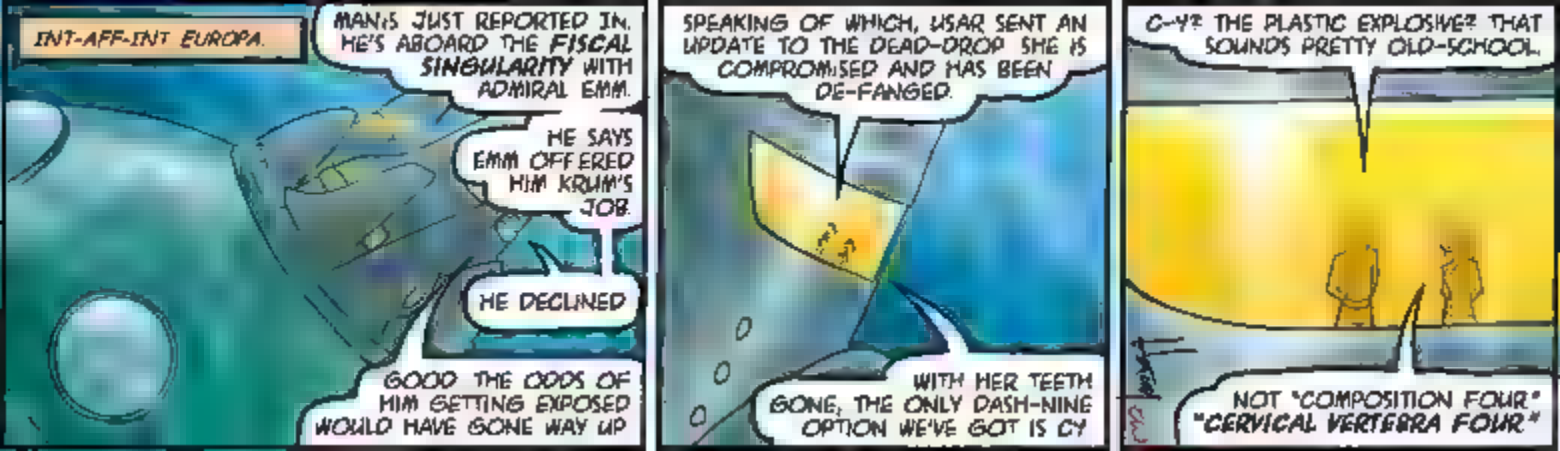

BOOM
BOOM
I DIDN'T KNOW YOU COULD DO THAT
THE FIRST RULE OF A.I. KILL SWITCHES IS "DON'T TALK ABOUT THE KILL SWITCH."

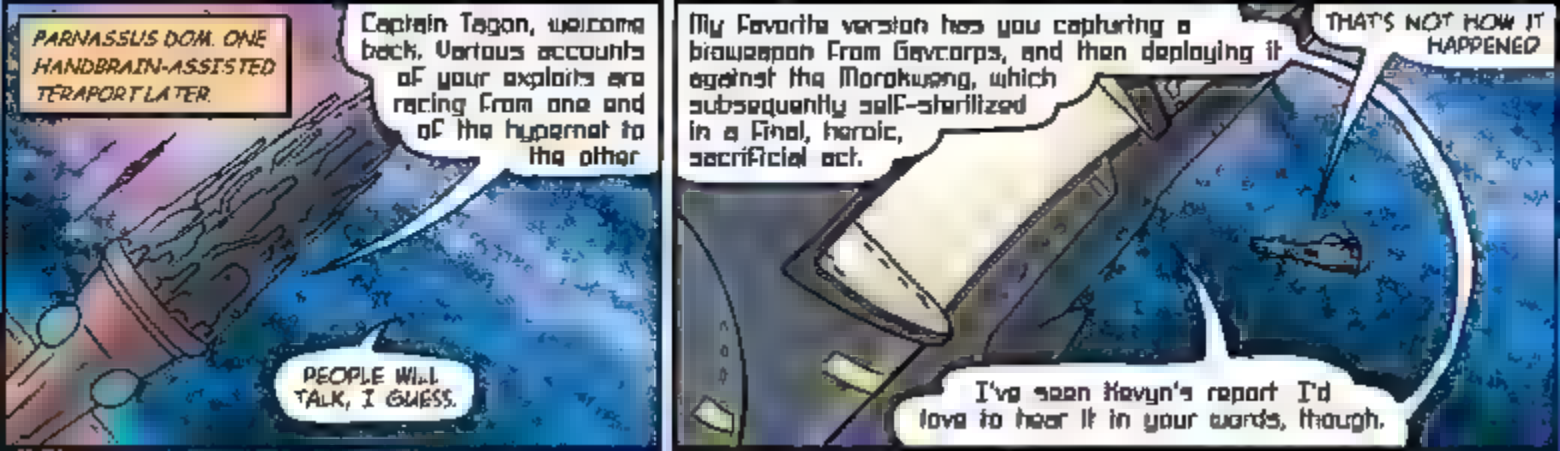

TWENTY MINUTES LATER
Your father is calling, Captain.
PUT HIM THROUGH.
HEY, SON. I.. UM... I CALLED TO APOLOGIZE FOR MISTREATING YOU.
I'M A LITTLE BUSY RIGHT NOW. WHEN DID YOU MISTREAT ME?
WHEN? BOY, FOR THE LAST TWENTY YEARS, THAT'S WHEN.
SERIOUSLY? YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT THIS NOW? DAD, TODAY HAS HAD ENOUGH PERIL, PANIC, KILLING, AND ALMOST BEING DEAD, THE LAST THING I WANT TO DO RIGHT NOW IS..
... IS ...
UM... YOU KNOW WHAT? NOW IS A GREAT TIME.


MALL-ONE
KATHRYN, I OWE YOU AN APOLOGY.
YOU WERE RIGHT
I DON'T KNOW... I THINK I COULD HAVE ARTICULATED THINGS A BIT BETTER
I DIDN'T SAY YOU WERE NICE. I SAID YOU WERE RIGHT.
I'LL AGREE TO THAT, PROVIDED YOU'LL AGREE THAT WE'RE STILL FRIENDS.

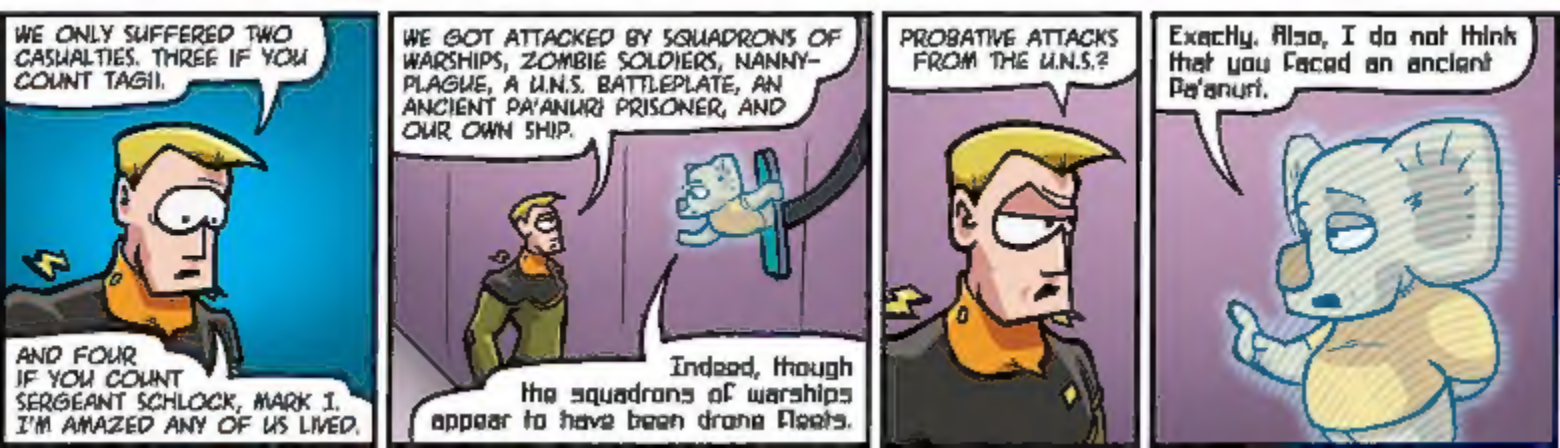

TOUCH-AND-GO.
I'M BACK ON DUTY CAN YOU GET US OUT OF HERE YET?
I'LL BE DRIVING THE TERAPORT FROM A HANDBRAIN, BUT THAT'S HOW WE USED TO DO IT
MAIN PROCESSORS ARE GONE, BUT WEAPON AND DRIVE SUB-PROCESSORS ARE OKAY AND CLEAN.
ALSO, LOOK AT WHO SURVIVED THE BLAST
That would be the A.I. who did not have a bomb in his head.
WE MIGHT FEEL SAFER IF I INSTALLED ONE.
Sure, but you have to let me put one in your head, too.

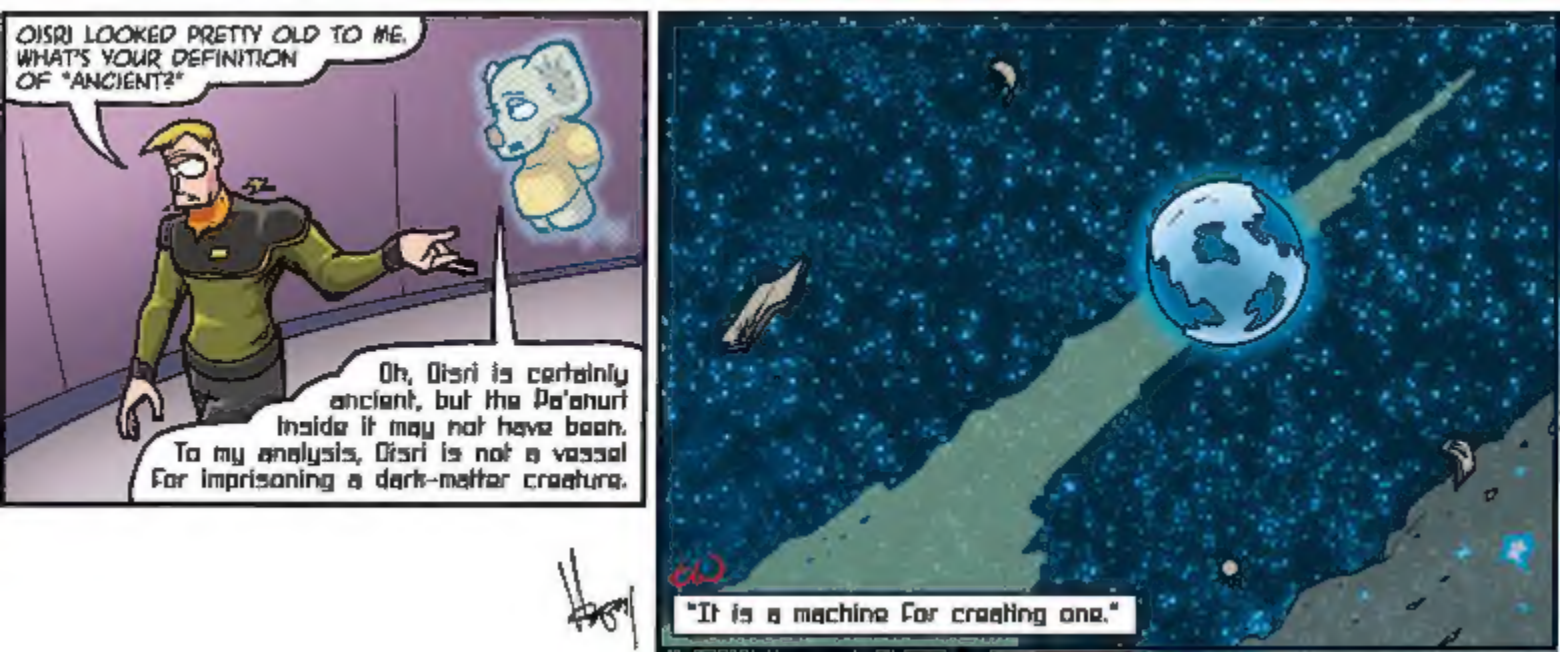

ABOARD THE U.N.S. RESCUE CUTTER FISCAL SINGULARITY
VREDEFORT HAS BAITED THE PA'ANURI OUT OF RANGE. THERE ARE MORE SURVIVORS WITHIN REACH NOW.
THANK YOU, CAPTAIN GASCA.
WITH KRUM GONE, I HAVE A VACANCY IN INTELLIGENCE SERVICES.
YOU ALREADY HAVE THE NECESSARY CLEARANCES, AND I RESPECT YOUR WORK.
I GOT A LITTLE BATTERED DURING OUR ESCAPE. SOME OF THE GOOD SENSE HAS BEEN KNOCKED RIGHT OUT OF ME.
BUT I'M GOING TO SAY "NO" ANYWAY


INT-AFF-INT EUROPA.
MAN: JUST REPORTED IN. HE'S ABOARD THE FISCAL SINGULARITY WITH ADMIRAL EMM.
HE SAYS EMM OFFERED HIM KRUM'S JOB.
HE DECLINED
GOOD THE ODDS OF HIM GETTING EXPOSED WOULD HAVE GONE WAY UP
SPEAKING OF WHICH, USAR SENT AN UPDATE TO THE DEAD-DROP SHE IS COMPROMISED AND HAS BEEN DE-FANGED.
WITH HER TEETH GONE, THE ONLY DASH-NINE OPTION WE'VE GOT IS CY
C-4? THE PLASTIC EXPLOSIVE? THAT SOUNDS PRETTY OLD-SCHOOL.
NOT "COMPOSITION FOUR." "CERVICAL VERTEBRA FOUR"


PARNASSUS DOM. ONE HANDBRAIN-ASSISTED TERAPORT LATER.
Captain Tagon, welcome back. Various accounts of your exploits are racing from one end of the hypernet to the other
PEOPLE WILL TALK, I GUESS.
My favorite version has you capturing a biowespon from Gavcorps, and then deploying it against the Morokweng, which subsequently self-sterilized in a final, heroic, sacrificial act.
THAT'S NOT HOW IT HAPPENED
I've seen Kevyn's report. I'd love to hear it in your words, though.


TAGII BLEW UP THE MOROKWENG. THEY ICED THEIR ANNIE PLANTS TO HIDE FROM THE PA'ANURI, AND UNDERESTIMATED JUST HOW DESPERATE OUR A.I. WAS TO KILL THINGS.
TAGII WOULD HAVE KILLED US NEXT, BUT VENTURA HAD LACED THE PROCESSORS WITH THOOMITE.
How do you feel about that?
OH, IS THIS A THERAPEUTIC DEBRIEF? FINE. I DON'T LIKE SECRETS THAT I'M NOT IN ON.
I HAVE TO GIVE THE GIRL CREDIT, THOUGH. THE KILL SWITCH WOULDN'T WORK UNTIL SHE WAS OUT OF THE SHIELDED RESTRAINTS, SO SHE BAITED TAGII INTO RELEASING HER.


WE ONLY SUFFERED TWO CASUALTIES. THREE IF YOU COUNT TAGII.
AND FOUR IF YOU COUNT SERGEANT SCHLOCK, MARK I. I'M AMAZED ANY OF US LIVED.
WE GOT ATTACKED BY SQUADRONS OF WARSHIPS, ZOMBIE SOLDIERS, NANNY-PLAGUE, A U.N.S. BATTLEPLATE, AN ANCIENT PA'ANURI PRISONER, AND OUR OWN SHIP.
Indeed, though the squadrons of warships appear to have been drone fleets.
PROBATIVE ATTACKS FROM THE U.N.S.?
Exactly. Also, I do not think that you faced an ancient Pa'anuri.


OISRI LOOKED PRETTY OLD TO ME. WHAT'S YOUR DEFINITION OF "ANCIENT?"
Oh, Oisri is certainly ancient, but the Po'ahuri inside it may not have been. To my analysis, Oisri is not a vessel for imprisoning a dark-matter creature.
"It is a machine for creating one."

EPILOGUE: ONE DAY LATER, IN PARNASSUS DOM...


THERE YOU GO. GOOD AS NEW.
Ahhh... much better. I am my old self again.
ANYTHING ELSE? I COULD REPLACE THAT DATA BUS. IT GOT PRETTY HOT THERE.
SHHHH.
Nope. I'm good.